

THE DEVELOPMENT AND APPLICATION OF AN INTERPRETIVE STRATEGY  
FOR OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

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## ABSTRACT

Preachers are responsible to “preach the Word” (2 Tim. 4:2), a significant portion of which is in the form of Old Testament narrative literature. Although these Old Testament narratives originate in another era, language, and culture, an accurate understanding of these stories can enable preachers to prepare sermons that proclaim “God’s Word to us today.” The preacher’s task is to develop and apply genre-sensitive interpretive strategies that will enable him or her to determine the meaning and significance of these Old Testament stories so that our contemporary audiences have an opportunity to hear, understand, and respond appropriately to the Word of God.

The purpose of this thesis project is to introduce preachers to an interpretive strategy designed specifically for Old Testament narrative literature. The content presents a three-stage interpretive strategy: choosing the text, hearing the text, and interpreting the text. Each stage of the interpretive strategy employs exercises that demonstrate an informed Old Testament narrative orientation. This three-stage interpretive strategy is developed and presented as a three-session course that can be offered independently or taught as part of a more comprehensive course on interpreting Old Testament genres.

## CHAPTER I: THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

Reading or hearing a narrative from the Old Testament is one thing; understanding its meaning and significance is an entirely different matter. J. P. Fokkelman sees this lack of understanding extending to the entire Bible: “The most widely read book in the world is not necessarily the best-read book.”<sup>1</sup> Paul Borden, however, referring specifically to biblical narratives, writes: “Finding the meaning of stories is like being a detective with a myriad of clues. Only certain clues reveal the mystery while other clues, if pursued, lead to a false conclusion. However, if the correct clues are used to uncover the crime, all the other clues fit in place. Then and only then can the interpreter begin to know the truth communicated in a particular narrative.”<sup>2</sup> Our task is to find meaning that respects both the history and the contemporary application of the Biblical text to the life of faith. Although Old Testament narratives come to us from another era, language, and culture, an accurate understanding of the story enables preachers to prepare sermons that provide contemporary audiences with an opportunity to hear, understand, and respond appropriately to the Word of God. Sidney Greidanus offers an affirming perspective:

Preachers today do not receive their messages directly from God the way the prophets did. Nor can preachers today claim with the apostles that they were “eyewitnesses” (2 Peter 1:16; cf. Luke 1:2). And yet, provided

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<sup>1</sup> J.P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Ineke Smit, 1995 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999) 8.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Borden, “Is There Really One Big Idea in That Story?” *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching: Connecting the Bible to People*, ed. Keith Willhite and Scott M. Gibson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998) 76.

their sermons are biblical, preachers today may also claim to bring the word of God.<sup>3</sup>

So preachers are able to effectively proclaim the word of God presented as Old Testament narratives to the degree that they correctly understand the intended meaning and contemporary significance of the story.

A clearly articulated interpretive strategy for Old Testament narrative literature will aid preachers in their attempt to discover and articulate the meaning of an Old Testament story. Without this kind of interpretive approach to Old Testament narrative literature, preachers become vulnerable to the distractions and pitfalls that inevitably lead to confusion, misunderstanding, inconsistency, and ultimately, to misrepresentations of the story's intended meaning. As Yairah Amit warns: "The Sages said that the Bible has seventy faces, or aspects, but that is not to say that they are all equally valid."<sup>4</sup> A well-conceived, step-by-step process, however, presents preachers with an opportunity to develop the skills and confidence in what otherwise might be perceived to be an insurmountable interpretive challenge.

Misrepresenting the intended meaning of Old Testament narratives will undermine what God designed His Word to accomplish. Inaccurate interpretations of an Old Testament story proclaim in His name what He never intended to communicate: this should be a preacher's greatest fear.<sup>5</sup> Listeners, on the other hand, who realize they are being fed a diet of inaccurate and inconsistent interpretations of God's Word, begin to

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<sup>3</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988) 7.

<sup>4</sup> Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) 137.

<sup>5</sup> Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002) 12.



question the reliability of the messenger and eventually the Word of God. When Scripture is not accurately interpreted or when selected portions are consistently avoided then both the preacher and his/her listeners become like the man who built the “house” of his faith and life upon sand (cf. Matt. 7:26). The faithful application of a clearly articulated interpretive strategy, however, reinforces the credibility and authority of the biblical message in the lives of both preachers and listeners through the preparation and delivery of accurate and consistent interpretations.

Preachers who approach the interpretive process with no idea where they are going, or how to get there, end up wasting a lot of time and energy. Too often this time wastage is typical of those who find their way to misrepresenting the biblical text. A clearly articulated interpretive strategy, however, can work like a roadmap, guiding the preacher to the desired destination of sound interpretation and effective communication of God’s Word. Without a strategy, depicting the preferred path between point A and point B, the interpreter/preacher wanders aimlessly. Part of the wandering is the result of being confronted with so many different possibilities to consider and “clues” to investigate (borrowing from the detective analogy used earlier). The final destination of the interpretive process is to discover the meaning or the significance of a particular story—by stating in a single sentence what the ancient author’s purpose was in telling this particular story. Mathewson acknowledges the challenge:

While you may find several ideas in a story, you must ask: What is the unifying center? What message is the writer conveying through the story? Identifying this message and writing it in a clear sentence is a significant

accomplishment. One of the most challenging stages in the interpretive process is identifying the story's exegetical idea.<sup>6</sup>

The “single sentence” is formulated by answering two questions: What is the author talking about? (subject), and What does he say about what he is talking about? (complement). The answers to these two questions are combined so that they form one complete sentence, which has been labeled: the exegetical idea, the big idea, the central truth, the thesis statement, the summary sentence, the proposition, or the point of the story. For the purposes of this research project the “exegetical idea” will be the preferred label. Dr. Haddon Robinson, if not the originator, has certainly popularized this step of the interpretive process within homiletic circles:

Finding the subject and complement does not start when we begin construction of our sermons. We pursue the subject and complement when we study the biblical text. Because each paragraph, section, or subsection of Scripture contains an idea, we do not understand a passage until we can state its subject and complement exactly. While other questions emerge in the struggle to understand the meaning of a biblical writer, the two (“What precisely is the author talking about?” and “What is the author saying about what he is talking about?”) are fundamental.<sup>7</sup>

The challenge, when working with Old Testament narratives, is that the answers to these two questions are implied and inferred rather than clearly articulated. Mathewson has observed that “generally, the biblical narrators show us rather than tell us”<sup>8</sup> what they

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<sup>6</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 81.

<sup>7</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1980) 42.

<sup>8</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 61.

mean. A clearly articulated interpretive strategy enables the preacher to sort through the multiple layers and ambiguities of Old Testament narratives by achieving a knowledge of exactly where he is going based upon the given features of the narrative and then knowing how he is planning to get to the homiletical goal itself. This kind of clarity and direction increases effectiveness and efficiency during the interpretive/sermonic process.

Preconceptions imposed on an Old Testament story will certainly influence the interpreter's efforts to identify the ancient author's intended meaning. Theological biases, a familiar, yet inappropriate method of interpretation, or a previously adopted misrepresentation of the story, all have the power to prejudice the most well-intentioned interpreter. Preconceptions, like first impressions, influence readers by causing alertness to some details and obliviousness to others. In the student handbook of a prominent Canadian Bible college, the presidential welcome letter included this comment: "The attitude with which the student comes will often determine what they find." What is true for students arriving on a Bible college campus is also true for interpreters arriving at the beginning of an Old Testament story. Some interpreters find in the story exactly what they were looking for; more open-minded interpreters allow the story to speak for itself.

There is a greater, more important truth, which is that these texts are well-written. If they are then so fortunate as to meet a good listener, they will come into their own without having to be pushed into compartments "far away," "long ago" and "very different." As products of a deliberate and meticulous designing intelligence they have been crafted to speak for themselves, provided there is a competent reader listening closely. They

are, after some training on our part, extremely able to reveal and explain themselves.<sup>9</sup>

When the preacher's preconceptions are allowed to stifle the interpretive process the chances of misrepresenting the truth of the story increases.

Subjectivity poses another threat that needs to be acknowledged and controlled if misrepresentation is to be avoided.<sup>10</sup> Obviously, as preachers sit in their study alone with the Scriptures their search for meaning requires a personal encounter with the text. Who hasn't participated in a small group Bible study where the following comment has been used to preface an emphatic interpretation, in contrast to all others: "Well, this is what it *says to me*"? Personal encounters with the biblical text will be validated by an interpretive strategy that seeks to uncover the objective meaning of the story.

Recognizing and then resisting the temptation to read personal experiences into the text, focusing on the specifics of the story with which the interpreter identifies, or allowing imagination to run wild, only serve to increase the level of subjectivity. Subjectivity can never be entirely eliminated but a clearly articulated interpretive strategy establishes procedures, exercises, and tools that monitor and manage its impact during the interpretive process.

Mastering the fundamentals of any discipline is an essential part of all new learning. Preaching is no exception. Approaching Old Testament narrative literature armed with a familiar, "basic" sermonic model or form can short-circuit the interpretive process and lead to misrepresentation. David C. Deuel places "substituting the preacher's conceptual structure for the narrative's unifying structure" at the top of his list of

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<sup>9</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* 21.

<sup>10</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* 25.

“possible ways of mishandling narratives.”<sup>11</sup> New Testament didactic literature is often the preferred source for the raw materials used in teaching the basic model, form, or “conceptual structure” for the “typical” sermon. David L. Larsen admits:

Our tendency is to approach and preach every passage with the same methodology. But narrative deserves and demands unique treatment. The linear, syllogistic pattern becomes imposition on such a text rather than an exposition ... “In teaching homiletics for many years I have used an essentially didactic or epistolary *model* for neophyte preachers.”<sup>12</sup> [italics added]

The natural progression, however, as the novice preacher’s confidence grows, is to venture beyond the apostle Paul’s New Testament letters for which this “model for neophyte preachers” was designed. Unfortunately one model cannot be made to fit every kind of literature. Insisting that an Old Testament narrative must be forced into an outline consisting of three points and a poem, for example, violates the text by completely ignoring the original literary form employed by God through the ancient author to deliver His message. Old Testament stories need to be permitted to produce outlines that are consistent with the development of the ideas within the story. Insisting that all biblical literature must be squeezed into a familiar “basic” mold will sow frustration in the study and reap misrepresentation in the pulpit.

Scholars refer to the different kinds of literature in the Bible as “genre.” These varying literary types resist being pressed into a one-size-fits-all sermonic model. Each

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<sup>11</sup> David C. Deuel, “Expository Preaching from Old Testament Narrative,” *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, ed. Richard L. Mayhue and Robert L. Thomas (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992) 281.

<sup>12</sup> David L. Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1995) 21.

type demands and deserves a uniquely structured interpretive strategy. Borden insists that the kind of literature should impact the interpretive process immediately.

Once you have selected a passage, the first requirement is to determine the genre of the literature from which the text comes. Failure to do this creates a genre error which will lead to faulty interpretation because the interpreter will ask the wrong questions of the text. Many basic exegetical courses in seminaries only teach how to exegete didactic or epistolary literature. As a result, many preachers have no idea how to study, let alone preach, passages of poetry, narrative, proverb, apocalypse, and parable. The result is that many preachers preach frequently from the epistles since their literary form closely matches the sermon's literary form. It is much easier to fit a square into a rectangle than into a triangle. The lesson for preachers; the genre determines the literary tools you need to interpret a passage.<sup>13</sup>

Unless the preacher becomes aware of these "literary tools" that characterize Old Testament narratives the search for an exegetical idea will be impaired. Members of a specific culture are trained, both formally and informally, so that they are capable of interpreting and understanding the common literature of their day.<sup>14</sup> In fact, this training is developed to the point where the interpreters respond intuitively as they are exposed to the different genre with which they are familiar. We interpret what we read in a comic book differently than what we would read in the maintenance manual stored in the glove

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Borden, "Expository Preaching," *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, ed. Michael Duduit (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1992) 65.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) 62.

compartment of the car, or Shakespearean plays like *Macbeth* or *Othello*. These intuitive interpretive adjustments are so much a part of us by the time we reach adulthood that we make them without employing any conscious effort. As we approach Old Testament narratives, Robert Alter reminds modern readers:

The Greek tendency to narrative specification, as I suggested earlier, seems to be one that modern literary practice has by and large adopted and developed. Precisely for that reason, we have to readjust our habits as readers in order to bring an adequate attentiveness to the rather different narrative maneuvers that are characteristic of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>15</sup>

Amit agrees: “since the biblical stories are ancient literature incorporated into a collection of works written over a period of at least six hundred years (from the eighth to the second century B.C.E.), we modern readers must learn to identify the principles that informed their design.”<sup>16</sup> Thankfully, preachers have not been abandoned to discover these “principles” and “maneuvers” all on their own. Literary criticism, although relatively new in its application to biblical texts, provides valuable insights that facilitate the development of a “narrative orientation.”<sup>17</sup>

*Narrative orientation* is an intuitive perspective that recognizes the signs, symbols and structures relied upon by the ancient author as he formed his story. There is no doubt in Alter’s mind that “one of the chief difficulties we encounter as modern readers in perceiving the artistry of biblical narrative is precisely that we have lost most of the keys to the conventions out of which it was shaped.”<sup>18</sup> Interpreters need to know what they

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<sup>15</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 129.

<sup>16</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 13.

<sup>17</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 13.

<sup>18</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 47.

should expect and what not to expect from these Old Testament stories. A narrative orientation provides that kind of perception so that the modern preacher can discover the exegetical idea of these ancient narratives. Without a narrative orientation to the world of the Old Testament text, the modern preacher will approach these ancient stories with interpretive strategies that will fail to pick up on the intrinsic signs, symbols and structures found there. Thomas G. Long elaborates on a metaphor used by philosophical linguistics to reinforce the importance of what is meant here. Human communication is like a game played according to certain rules.

This game-playing would be relatively easy if there were only one game to master, but human communication consists of many games played on many levels and with multiple variations. Sometimes we convey direct information to one another in correctly constructed sentences—that is one game. But we also tell stories, sing songs, make puns, recite poetry, crack jokes, pose questions, and use language in countless other ways, each of which involves a separate game with its own rules. Before we can follow the rules, we must know what game is being played. Catching the ball and running as far as I can with it may be a brilliant play in football but a blunder in baseball. If the speaker is playing one game and the listener another, communication breaks down.<sup>19</sup>

Without a narrative orientation an interpreter does not play according to the “rules” of Old Testament “narrative game.” Then a breakdown in communication results and the chances of misrepresenting the author’s purpose in telling the story increases

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989) 14.



dramatically.

A cursory review of the biblical text on its own terms transforms modern interpreters into tourists in a foreign land. The culture, geography, many descriptions of the sights, sounds, and smells, stimulate new experiences as “we attempt to work our way back into the world of the Scriptures to understand the original message.”<sup>20</sup> Failure to consider the implications of the obvious historical separation between the contemporary preacher and the original author can lead to a misrepresentation of the purpose of the story. A well-conceived, step-by-step interpretive strategy, based on a narrative orientation, will aid the interpreter in his or her efforts to bridge the gap between the ancient world and the contemporary audience.

Another unfortunate, but common misrepresentation of these Old Testament stories occurs when they are utilized primarily as illustrations for the rest of the Bible. Often, the purpose of the original author in telling the story is not even considered. King David’s act of adultery with Bathsheba and the ensuing death of the child that resulted, for example, becomes the ultimate illustration of what can happen to those who dare to become involved in pre-marital and/or extra-marital indiscretions. Certainly, infidelity is inappropriate behavior for those desiring to live God-honoring lives, but was that the message the author of 2 Samuel 11 intended to communicate? Deuel offers a legitimate warning: “Using Old Testament narrative only to illustrate New Testament teaching ... results in ignoring much Old Testament instruction that may serve as background for New Testament theology, or else as teaching not repeated in the New Testament.”<sup>21</sup> These Old Testament narratives are intended to be much more than just examples or

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<sup>20</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* 25.

<sup>21</sup> Deuel, "Expository Preaching from Old Testament Narrative" 283.

illustrations of what happens when we obey or disobey God's law. Old Testament narratives will continue to be misrepresented until the truth of the story is discovered within the story.

This is not an exhaustive list of all the possible distractions and pitfalls that threaten to sabotage the interpretive process of Old Testament narratives but merely a sample of some of the challenges that need to be addressed if the interpreter wants to avoid misrepresenting the ancient storyteller's purpose. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Matt. 11:15). Preachers can acquire those kinds of ears through the development of a narrative orientation that is permitted to inform, shape, and direct a clearly articulated interpretive strategy.

Some preachers can never be accused of misinterpreting Old Testament narratives because they avoid them completely. How is this possible? Intentionally or unintentionally, weeks can turn into months, and months can become years, without one of these Old Testament stories serving as the foundation of a biblical sermon. Realizing, however, that somewhere between 30 to 40 percent of the Old Testament is written in narrative form<sup>22</sup> establishes the irresponsibility of such avoidance—intentionally or otherwise. The sheer volume of this genre within the biblical text demands that preachers develop an interpretive strategy that will expose their truths.

One intimidating factor inhibiting preachers from attempting to prepare to preach Old Testament narratives is their length. Stories are not often told within a few verses but across paragraphs and even chapters. How can one possibly do justice in 20 to 25 minutes when it might take 10 minutes just to read the biblical version of the story? A preacher

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<sup>22</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 20.

sitting in his study on Monday morning assumes that the more material one starts with the more time it will take to work through the exegetical-homiletical process. At the same time, no one is more conscious of the fact that Sunday is still only six days away. Time management and the amount of material used to tell the story are “co-conspirators” in luring preachers away from this prominent genre of biblical literature.

People love to hear a good story. We are drawn into its portrayals of personalities and events; we are entertained; we feel connected; and at times we find ourselves identifying with the experiences of the characters within. Listeners or readers, however, because the teachings of Old Testament narratives are more often than not implied rather than explicitly stated, can deduce a wide variety of “lessons for life” or “morals of the story.” Herein lies a story’s vulnerability. Some, having heard the story, have left, satisfied with a “Well, that was a good story!” conclusion—nothing more and nothing less! Preachers need to recognize that these ancient authors were not only superb storytellers but inspired theologians; not only historians but also literary artists. Long presents it this way: “When history is seen as theologically shaped, it takes an artist to tell the story.”<sup>23</sup> These Old Testament stories are how God-conscious, biblical writers chose to recount historical events. Their purpose was not to create an historical record but to present a God-story. Until perceptions change Old Testament narratives will continue to struggle to find their way into preaching calendars because they are seen as juvenile, the “milk” of the Word, good children’s stories, or historical fiction.

The characters of an Old Testament narrative can become a distraction as they capture our attention and dominate the interpretive process. Greidanus refers to this

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<sup>23</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* 68.

tendency as the “slide into anthropocentric preaching.”<sup>24</sup> The preacher, unintentionally, becomes so preoccupied with the circumstances or behavior attached to a specific character within the story, like Joseph, Ruth, Esther, or David and Goliath, for example, that the purpose of the story is forgotten. The interpreter leaves the text with a few “life lessons” or “good ideas” instead of understanding the author’s purpose in telling a story using these characters. Deuel offers a remedy but uses the more common “biographical sermon” label: “A simple corrective for this is to focus on the entire message to its original audience instead of having the congregation identify with specific characters in the story.”<sup>25</sup> The human characters demonstrate how God is at work in and through real people, and, sometimes in spite of them, is still accomplishing his plans and purposes. When interpreters lose sight of the narrative’s overall purpose and begin to fixate on details, events, or characters within the story, they have in effect lost sight of the story.

The “user-friendly” or “seeker sensitive” emphasis promoted by contemporary “church-growth gurus” have undermined the central role that the Scriptures have traditionally played in public worship. Attendees, who arrive at church with a copy of the Scriptures in hand, ready to study, find themselves part of an ever-shrinking minority. Sermons, in an attempt to be relevant, limit the use of these “obscure texts” for fear of “turning off” the newcomer. As a result, Larsen’s examples are less surprising than they ought to be:

A careful study of a leading evangelical publication for leaders found that in the first 434 essays of the magazine less than 1 percent referred to the

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<sup>24</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* 216.

<sup>25</sup> Deuel, “Expository Preaching from Old Testament Narrative” 283.

Bible or Christian doctrine. A national youth leader enthralled large numbers with his daily text from the Tales of Dracula.<sup>26</sup>

When a preacher underestimates or loses confidence in the content of a book (of which Old Testament narratives are a large part) claiming to be “sharper than a surgeon’s scalpel . . . able to judge the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb. 4:12), avoidance of these ancient stories is easily justified.

By way of concluding this section: A biblical text can never mean what it never meant. Positively stated: the true meaning of the biblical text is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken.<sup>27</sup> Preaching sermons that are founded on accurate interpretations of any biblical text is a difficult task. Preaching sermons that are founded on accurate interpretations of Old Testament narratives presents an even greater challenge ... but it is possible! Amit is “convinced that the attempt to elicit the explicit or implicit significance of a story by studying its various components, tying up as many of them as possible in a logical way, and paying close attention to its nuances and subtleties, can direct the interpreter to the plain interpretations.”<sup>28</sup> Capturing and delivering the meaning and significance of Old Testament narratives is the motivation for this research project.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this project is to develop a curriculum that will be used to train preachers in discovering and articulating the “exegetical idea” of Old Testament

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<sup>26</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching* 37.

<sup>27</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, 2nd ed., 1981 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993) 26.

<sup>28</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 129.

narratives. The curriculum itself will consist of three complete seventy-five minute lesson plans. As part of the training, participants will be introduced to an interpretive strategy designed specifically with Old Testament narrative literature in mind. Students will develop a “narrative orientation” through exposure to the conventions and literary techniques employed by these ancient storytellers. Basic skills, procedures and exercises will be introduced, practiced, and evaluated so that the trainees will “seek first to understand” the meaning and significance of an Old Testament story before attempting to be understood. The project is not intended to be an exhaustive presentation but rather to provide a “practitioner’s toolbox” in which the preacher will discover an elementary, step-by-step process along with complementary tools to aid him or her in understanding Old Testament narratives. The content of this project is also limited in the sense that it focuses upon the exegetical side of the sermon preparation equation. A clear understanding of the meaning and purpose of a biblical text is the foundation on which the sermon is built.

This project is intended for those who have successfully completed a Bible college or seminary course where the student was introduced to the basic developmental stages of biblical preaching and/or to a basic exegetical-hermeneutical process. “Many basic exegetical courses in seminaries only teach how to exegete didactic or epistolary literature. As a result, many preachers have no idea how to study, let alone preach, passages of poetry, narrative, proverb, apocalypse, and parable.”<sup>29</sup> This project, therefore, is intended to provide students with additional know-how so that they can approach previously intimidating biblical material with interpretive confidence as they begin to

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<sup>29</sup> Borden, “Expository Preaching” 65.

navigate the distance between the text and the sermon.

There are five chapters included in the thesis project. This first chapter has identified a problem or deficiency that will be addressed by developing a set of genre-sensitive interpretive strategies and tools for Old Testament narrative. Chapter 2 will present a theological framework for the biblical exegesis of narrative literature. What direction or guidance does the Bible offer the interpreter of an Old Testament story? Chapter 3 will present a literature review that will assist those who are motivated to pursue this area of study further. Chapter 4 will provide three complete seventy-five minute lesson plans for an advanced homiletic class at the undergraduate level. Chapter 5 will provide an evaluation and any further reflections that result from implementing the material.

## IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Training material that introduces preachers to an elementary interpretive strategy for Old Testament narratives is important for the following seven reasons. First, pastors need to learn to preach effectively. Ministers are commonly referred to as preachers. A preacher, who cannot preach or will not preach, fails at the core of his calling. As every pastor knows, the preparation and delivery of sermons takes a large portion of his time and thought. The pastor knows that his or her pulpit ministry will enhance the ministry of the congregation. As a church increases in size, the minister depends more and more on his ability to preach. In order to influence his congregation he must be prepared to preach with skill.

Second, the church needs skilled preachers. Those who take the Bible seriously, both in the pulpit and the pew, believe that the Scriptures are God's truth. It is a sin to

bore people with the Bible or to give the impression to a congregation that the Scriptures are irrelevant to life. Pastors who care about their congregations must know how to prepare sermons from all genres of biblical literature and how to deliver them in a way that accurately represents the biblical text.

Third, effective preachers are made not born. Recognizing the validity of spiritual giftedness does not negate the need for on-going personal development. “Preachers who work at the craft of preaching become—over time—good communicators. Poor preaching can often be traced to preachers who do not work at their craft; or, if they do, work only on aspects that come easily.”<sup>30</sup> Improving the preacher’s interpretive skills as they relate to Old Testament narrative literature will lay a solid foundation on which to develop the sermon.

Fourth, didactic or epistolary literature represents a relatively small portion of biblical literature. The percentage of the Bible’s content, however, that can be clearly identified as narrative literature suggests that this may be God’s primary mode of special revelation. The most conservative estimates report that somewhere between 30 to 40 percent of biblical literature is presented in the form of a story.<sup>31</sup> The apostle Paul was referring to Old Testament Scriptures when he wrote to a young pastor of the church in the city of Ephesus: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the [person] of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). If we accept the position that God inspired the writers of these canonized documents so that the authors wrote exactly what God wanted to be communicated, then these stories become increasingly significant. Are

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<sup>30</sup> Borden, “Expository Preaching” 64.

<sup>31</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 20.



30 to 40 percent of the average minister's sermons based on narrative literature? In order to reflect the biblical percentage, of the 52 weeks of the year, 16 to 21 sermons should be based on narrative portions of Scripture. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., reasons his way to a similar conclusion:

Since both the Old and New Testaments are largely written in story form, narrative is the essence of biblical revelation. The long narrative corpus of both testaments form the heart of the story and message of the Bible. That makes understanding narrative essential for all interpreters of the Bible.<sup>32</sup>

Preachers, who have been entrusted with the responsibility of teaching the "whole counsel of God," are being inexcusably negligent if they choose to ignore or avoid (for whatever reason or excuse) this greater portion of Biblical literature. God's written revelation of His activities, His plans, His purposes, and His person, preserved in Old Testament narrative literature deserve more of our time, attention and interpretive efforts.

Fifth, the preacher who demonstrates a commitment to a clearly articulated interpretive process grounded in genre-sensitivity, promotes a high view of Scripture amongst his or her audience. A high view of Scripture "affirms the complete truthfulness and the full and final authority of the Old and New Testament Scriptures as the Word of God written. The appropriate response to it is humble assent and obedience."<sup>33</sup> Anything less, promotes an approach to Scripture that often breeds misunderstanding and confusion as the following testimony illustrates:

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<sup>32</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "Narrative," *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*, ed. D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese Jr. (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995) 69.

<sup>33</sup> Kenneth S. Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry, *Evangelical Affirmations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academic Book, 1990) 32.

I drive my car and listen to the Christian radio station, something my wife always tells me I should stop doing (“because it only gets you upset”).

There I hear preacher after preacher be so absolutely sure of his bombproof answers and foolproof *biblical* interpretations (in spite of the fact that Preacher A at 9:30 a.m. usually contradicts Preacher B at 10:00 a.m. and so on throughout the day).<sup>34</sup>

A consistent modeling of this level of commitment will also help listeners to adopt similar attitudes and practices as they attempt to discern the meaning of God’s word to them.

Sixth, is that analyzing biblical texts as literary works is a relatively new discipline to be added to the interpreter’s repertoire. The emphasis has shifted from a preoccupation with the search for the historical aspects of the text to the literary aspects of the text. This shift in emphasis has produced an overwhelming and potentially disheartening amount of material for preachers to consider. Sorting through the literary jargon and various emphases, priorities, and strategies for the purpose of articulating an elementary, step-by-step interpretive process for Old Testament narrative will make this material accessible. We need to learn to crawl before we can walk and run.

Seventh, a preacher’s credibility, respectability and, as a result, trustworthiness will be undermined or reinforced by their approach and handling of the Scriptures. Actions speak louder than words. We live in a culture where those standing in the pulpit are no longer assumed to be above reproach. No longer can we assume that we gain a hearing just because the Scriptures have been read at some point prior to or during our

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<sup>34</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., 2001) xiii.

presentations. Pointing to the unique considerations and strategies attached to specific genre of Scripture will not only provide accountability but will transform our listeners into Bereans who are able to examine the Scriptures for themselves to see if what we are saying is true (Acts 17:11).

Maintaining a balanced perspective, of course, is important:

Generic analysis must not be neglected or become a law unto itself. It should serve a higher purpose, that of contributing to the reader's knowledge of God's Word and relationship with God himself.<sup>35</sup>

The intention and motivation of this research project is to help novice preachers to become effective interpreters of Old Testament stories so that both they and their listeners will not only hear the Word of God, but understand it and act on it.

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<sup>35</sup> Branson L. Woodard Jr. and Michael E. Travers, "Literary Forms and Interpretation," ed. D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese Jr. (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995) 43.

## CHAPTER II: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Here we must ascertain the biblical/theological foundation of the present project. This foundation will provide for the ideas, concepts, and strategies that enhance and complement, rather than derail or undermine, what God desires to accomplish in and through the contemporary preaching of His Word, particularly at the point of its narratives. This chapter will furnish the necessary biblical/theological foundation for the development of training materials that present an interpretive strategy for working with Old Testament narratives. The four areas of theological reflection that establish the foundation for this project are as follows: God and Humanity in Redemptive History, The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture, Pneumatology of Interpretation, and The Truth as Narrative.

### GOD AND HUMANITY IN REDEMPTIVE HISTORY

Narratives tell events and events that are produced by human action—at least those narratives which are the biblical stuff of all redemptive history. In every culture and in every age, from childhood bedtime stories to the reminiscences of elders, we capture events in words and distill them into stories. Real events and the stories that tell them are not the only kind of story human beings tell but this is the type the Bible's narratives lead us to believe we are reading, retelling, and hearing. "Storytelling—the urge to narrative—is a human universal."<sup>36</sup> But what is unique about biblical stories? Surely it is at the point of the biblical narratives' inclusion of God as one of their primary characters or actors. Biblical narratives are the telling of events that present human and divine action and

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<sup>36</sup> Jerome T. Walsh, *Style & Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001) 1.

relationship. Sidney Greidanus points out “the prominence of the narrative genre in the Bible is related to the Bible’s central message that God acts in *history*. No other genre can express that message as well as narrative.”<sup>37</sup> When we do theology from a narrative approach we are focused upon the biblical accounts of events that have been developed and directed by a coming together of divine and human action, divine and human authorship. The evangelical approach to narrative theology is developed in order to show how God has and will redeem his people, both the Jews and the multitudes from among the Gentile nations. If we attempted to place all the Biblical narratives under a single heading, based upon the question of their thematic inclusion in the whole Bible, we would choose *The Story of Redemption*.

#### God’s Covenant with Humanity and Humanity’s Sin

The Story of Redemption should be thought of as the unifying theme of the entire collection of biblical narratives and as such finds its operative principle in the biblical concept of covenant. The Story of Redemption, continuously giving expression to the covenant between God and his people leads us to reflect upon the chief characteristics of divine action: God’s covenantal ways with humanity. Abraham and David will be featured here as two pivotal Old Testament characters associated with God’s covenantal initiatives (cf., Gen. 12:1-3, 2 Sam. 7:11-16, 1 Chron. 17:10-14).<sup>38</sup>

God’s covenantal initiative with Abraham and his descendants is the fundamental truth permeating the narratives of Genesis 12–50. The narratives of God’s initiatives with

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<sup>37</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* 188.

<sup>38</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978) 35.

Abraham provide extensive material to examine and to further identify the characteristics and purposes of divine covenantal action. Sailhamer's introduction to the book of Genesis identifies the covenant between God and Israel established at Mount Sinai as "the most prominent event and the most far-reaching theme in the Pentateuch."<sup>39</sup> He then makes a connection between God's covenantal initiative at Mount Sinai and the Abrahamic covenant: "the author sees the covenant at Sinai as God's plan to restore his blessing to mankind through the descendants of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; Exod. 2:24)."<sup>40</sup> The Sinai covenant is an elaboration of the Abrahamic covenant, which preceded it. Walton views the history of the establishment of God's covenant with Israel as a "defensible proposal" as the purpose in writing the book of Genesis. "Chapters 1-11 establish the need for the covenant, and chapters 12-50 establish the formation of the covenant."<sup>41</sup> For Walton the covenant was the means to a revelatory end: "God determined to embark on a program of revelation. Abram and his family were elected as the instruments of that revelatory program, and the covenant was the chosen mechanism. *God revealed himself through the covenant.*"<sup>42</sup> The biblical concept of a God-initiated covenant is essential to The Story of Redemption.

God's calling of Abraham shows the grace of God to be an unmistakable part of each story. The particularity of God's calling is of course one of the most striking aspects of God's action and man's response. Bruce Waltke points out that "in sovereign grace God calls a particular individual or a people, which entails not selecting others, to

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<sup>39</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis - Numbers, The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1990) 12.

<sup>40</sup> Sailhamer, *Genesis - Numbers* 12.

<sup>41</sup> John H. Walton, *Genesis, The NIV Application Commentary*, ed. Terry Muck, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2001) 37.

<sup>42</sup> Walton, *Genesis* 52.

mediate his blessing.”<sup>43</sup> We search in vain to find an explanation to the “Why Abraham?” of divine selection, or better, “election.” The introduction to the overall story identifies Abraham as one of three sons of a Chaldean named Terah. Abraham was husband to Sarai/Sarah, his half-sister (same father, different mothers) who, as the text says, “was barren; she had no children” (Gen. 11:30). Abraham had become a resident of Haran as a result of his father’s attempt to relocate his family from Ur to the Hebron area of Canaan. That is the complete résumé of Abraham’s unspectacular qualifications. Abraham’s credentials, or more accurately, lack of credentials, set the stage for a story in which God’s gracious initiatives with a less-than-perfect recipient comes into full view.

Although the means employed by God to communicate with Abraham are not disclosed, the text indicates that God definitively called Abraham to active obedience, to a nomadic life in Canaanite territory. Shimon Bar-Efrat views God’s calling of Abraham (cf., Gen. 12:1) as an example of a word order in which “nouns are sometimes ranged in a certain order, from weak to strong (gradation), conveying a particularly strong impression of emphasis.”<sup>44</sup> One detects a semantic spiral that gradually becomes more and more intimate: “Leave your country ... your people ... your father’s household” (12:1). This gradation serves to emphasize the difficulty facing Abraham when God called him to leave behind the known and the familiar, that which belonged to him and to which he belonged, in order to embrace the unknown, the unfamiliar, and a whole new set of relations and objects to which he would belong, largely by promise. Of course the greatest challenge would be to accept permanent status as a stranger in a strange land. An

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<sup>43</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2001) 203.

<sup>44</sup> Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, trans. Dorothea Shefer-Vanson (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1979; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd., 2000), 217.

alternative translation of God's call for action "Go ... *so that I may* make you ... bless you ... etc." (*italics* added) emphasizes "the divine intentionality" of the event.<sup>45</sup> Divine intentionality, however, did not negate the need for a human response to God's initiative. The narrative discloses the role human action can play in cooperating with God's gracious initiatives so that his plans and purposes are realized. God's covenantal initiative with Abraham is revealed not to coerce him but as part of a benevolent invitation to respond appropriately to the call of God.

God's initiative in calling Abraham included promises of divine provision and protection. The reference in Genesis 11 to Sarai (Abraham's wife; hereafter, Sarah) as being "barren; she had no children" (vs. 30) increases the significance of God's promise that Abraham will become a "great nation" (12:2). Walton explains that the chapter 11 comment "is important to prepare the reader for the offering of the covenant and the faith it takes for Abram to follow God's direction."<sup>46</sup> The command to be "fruitful and multiply" (cf., Gen. 1:28; 9:7) becomes a promise in the context of God's covenantal initiative with Abraham. Abraham will indeed be fruitful and multiply; in fact, he will become the father of a great nation in spite of his wife's "barrenness." But God's covenantal initiative was not confined to providing Abraham with a descendant whose descendants would eventually become a great nation. God also promised Abraham that he would make him renowned, that he would become an agent of blessing to others, and that he would become the agent of a divine cursing for any who would curse him.

The blessing/cursing continuum is established in God's covenant with Abraham.

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<sup>45</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15, Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987) 275.

<sup>46</sup> Walton, *Genesis* 397.



God is the ultimate determining agent when it comes to the fortunes and failures of humanity. The “blessing” of God’s covenantal initiative with Abraham connects the patriarchal narratives with each other (cf., 24:1; 26:3; 35:9; 39:5) and also links them with primeval history (cf., 1:28; 5:2; 9:1). “The promises of blessing to the patriarchs are thus a reassertion of God’s original intentions for man.”<sup>47</sup> The promises incorporated in God’s calling of Abraham necessitate supernatural intervention for God to prove himself as the faithful covenantal partner He is while never ceasing to be God and Lord over all things.

Abraham’s obedient response to God’s initial call led to another unique encounter that reiterated and expanded God’s promise. Hamilton explains the significance of the shift from “The Lord had said to Abram” (Gen. 12:1) to “The Lord appeared to Abram” (12:7): “A theophany is a way of augmenting an audition to heighten its dramatic force, and reinforce the claim that a divine intervention has occurred.”<sup>48</sup> God’s promise now expanded to include Abraham’s “offspring” as recipients of the land God had specifically promised to Abraham. God, once again, is presented as the Lord who initiates events that are completed by obedient human action. In this case Abraham acts but never speaks. God speaks. The narrator speaks. Abraham remains silent. Walton recognizes God’s covenantal initiative with Abraham as the introduction of a “revelatory program” that stretches from Abraham to Christ. It’s a revelatory program not dependent on Israel’s cooperation and faithfulness. The promises of the covenant are conditional but God’s

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<sup>47</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* 275.

<sup>48</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. R.K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990) 377.

revelatory program will not be deterred.<sup>49</sup> Israel, in fact, proves to be an unfaithful covenant partner and forfeits the covenant blessings. Indeed, the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel, for example, was commissioned by God to announce his judgments on Israel and the surrounding nations. Repeatedly, the motivation for God's punitive activity is declared to be revelatory: "Then you will know that I am the Lord" (cf., 7:4; 11:10; 12:20; 13:21, 23; 14:8; 20:38, 42; fourteen times in all). God's calling of Abraham involved a revelation of God's redemptive attributes in his dealings with humanity.

The narrative of God's calling of Abraham, while reporting human action, shines the spotlight on God's gracious initiatives. Walton agrees: "the author's purpose is focused on God, not on using Abram for a role model."<sup>50</sup> Both, divine and human action in a reciprocal and a-symmetrical way, however, provides the unique power of the story. The radical difference between the recipient of God's benevolent invitation and wonderful promises through supernatural interactions are the events, which determine that narrative. But the overriding purpose of the entire Abrahamic narrative is to reveal the nature and purpose of God's gracious initiative in establishing a covenant relationship with humanity.

Abraham's responsive actions, as reported in Genesis 12:1-9, epitomize his reciprocal relationship to God and to God's gracious covenantal initiative resulting in God's approval. Finding approval in response to God's covenantal initiatives, however, was not always a foregone conclusion for Abraham's predecessors and/or his descendants, the heirs of the covenant promises. Their problems are unique instances of

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<sup>49</sup> Walton, *Genesis* 403.

<sup>50</sup> Walton, *Genesis* 398.

what Scriptures tell of humanity's determination, almost from the very beginning of the story, to live independently or in spite of God's initiatives.

In the continuing story of redemption after Abraham, the story of the sons of his son, Jacob and Esau, tells of events that were produced by sinful human action in spite of God's gracious covenantal initiative. The biblical account of Esau's life includes a pre-birth prediction of his defection from the covenant relationship with God. In answer to Isaac's prayer, a struggle between twins within Rebekah's womb signaled the end of her infertility. Infertility within the patriarchal narratives (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah) reinforces the point that fulfillment of God's covenant promises to the chosen "seed" or descendent(s) of Abraham would not be accomplished merely by human effort.<sup>51</sup> In fact, God's sovereign choice as to who would inherit the covenant promise was independent of the cultural rule of primogeniture and of Jacob's works, for Jacob got the birthright through scheming and deception.<sup>52</sup> The apostle Paul, however, confirms in Romans 9:11 that this short narrative is the result of a sovereign choice of God: "before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand" it was disclosed that the older (Esau) would serve the younger (Jacob).

God, in response to Rebekah's expression of concern, informs her that the jostling she feels within her womb is the beginning of a conflict that will characterize the relationship between the twins, a conflict in which the younger will prevail. Waltke refers to this as a "fitting introduction" for a narrative in which a classic case of sibling rivalry will occupy center stage. "The conflict progresses from the womb, to the troubled

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<sup>51</sup> Sailhamer, *Genesis - Numbers* 182.

<sup>52</sup> Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Volume Three, Integrative Theology: Three Volumes in One*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996) 31.

delivery of twins (25:26), to their differences in profession (25:27), and to the opposing preferences of the parents (25:28).”<sup>53</sup> Human and divine pre-birth interactions foreshadowed the struggles that would prove to have a direct impact on God’s covenantal relationship with the heirs of the promise.

On one specific occasion Jacob was at home among the tents, as was his habit (25:27), exercising his culinary skills when Esau arrived “from the open country, famished” (25:29). How was it that a “skillful hunter” found himself in such a predicament? Impulsive acts embarked upon with little foresight or planning can eventuate in such vulnerability. Or maybe it was Esau’s determination not to return home empty handed. The desire to protect that “skillful hunter” reputation pushed him beyond the limits of his supplies. The story, however, mentions nothing that would suggest that Esau arrived home with anything more than an all-consuming appetite. Immediately admitting his need, Esau’s brash and demanding expression seemed to presume that Jacob would oblige his brother’s command to give him some of that “red stuff”(25:30). Jacob’s knee-jerk response indicates that he may have been lying in wait for the opportunity to exploit his brother. Opportunists are like that. They make their plans, wait patiently, and then pounce at just the right time. Jacob knew his brother well. Esau’s strengths and weaknesses could not be hidden from such an intimate rival. In the end, Esau’s vulnerability, accommodated by his own personality traits, and exploited by his twin brother, resulted in the sad commentary: “So Esau despised his birthright” (Gen. 25:34).

Despising a birthright meant that Esau was prepared to give up a considerable advantage that accompanied the good fortune of being a firstborn son. In the ancient

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<sup>53</sup> Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* 357.

world the father's material wealth, upon his death, would be divided amongst his sons with the firstborn receiving a double portion. In other words, with two sons, Isaac's material possessions would be divided in three equal portions, Esau would receive 2 portions, and Jacob only one. This discrepancy would be painful enough for the second son, but when your birth order was just minutes apart (as is typical in the birth of twins) the sense of injustice would increase substantially.<sup>54</sup> The material value alone would make the birthright something to be treasured. In the Esau/Jacob case, however, there was much more at stake than just material wealth. "There was intrinsic value connected to a birthright, not just utilitarian value."<sup>55</sup> Part of the intrinsic value would include one day becoming the family patriarch. In Abraham's family, the intrinsic value increased because the one possessing the birthright not only became the family patriarch but heir of the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>56</sup> By trading his birthright for some of Jacob's "red stuff," Esau's physical appetite and self-gratification took precedence. Although he had the right of the firstborn, Esau did not value it over a small bowl of soup.<sup>57</sup> Conceding to Jacob's ludicrous offer to exchange a birthright for a bowl of stew without any negotiation whatsoever proves Esau's shortsighted, impulsive approach to life which chose to ignore any potential, long-term consequences. His justification: "Look I am about to die. What good is the birthright to me?" (Gen. 25:32), displays utter contempt. The four verbs arranged in rapid succession in Genesis 25:34 ("He ate ... drank ... got up ... and left") provide evidence that Esau's indifferent spurning of the birthright was done without giving it a second thought. In Esau's mind, the value of future covenantal

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<sup>54</sup> Walton, *Genesis* 550.

<sup>55</sup> Walton, *Genesis* 551.

<sup>56</sup> Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* 364.

<sup>57</sup> Sailhamer, *Genesis - Numbers* 185.

blessings and material benefits were of no consequence when compared to the self-preservation and instant gratification to be found in the acceptance of Jacob's offer. Jacob, on the other hand, appreciated the value of the birthright as demonstrated in his effort to secure the exchange: "Swear to me first" (25:33). Swearing ensured that Esau would be obligated to honor the exchange even after his appetite had been satisfied. Jacob was prepared to do all that he could to secure the birthright. Esau, on the other hand, was prepared to hand it over without forethought or resistance. In this way Esau despised his birthright and defected from God's covenantal relationship.

The New Testament's reference to the Jacob and Esau narratives in the book of Hebrews indicates the narrated truth about Isaac's firstborn: "See to it that no one is ... *godless like Esau*, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears (Heb. 12:16-17 *italics added*). Esau's "godlessness" displayed itself in a story of how he despised his birthright. "The narrator's parting shot tells us that Esau *despised his birthright* (or as Speiser translates it, *misprized his birthright*), alerting us that Esau earned the Bible's later assessment of him as an *irreligious* or *profane* (KJV) person, insensitive to spiritual values."<sup>58</sup> It has become the classic story of a small immediate gain, in bartering away something that was of far greater worth—indeed, of eternal value. Esau's defection from God's covenant with his father Isaac offers the possibility of learning from our own sinful responses to God's gracious initiatives, that they can earn similar consequences. Thus the stories of God's gracious covenantal initiatives where

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<sup>58</sup> Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*, 2nd ed., 1987 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1992) 78.

there is a requirement of appropriate human response show the reader/hearer that these are not necessarily typical, natural, or what is to be expected.

As we read the biblical narratives a common truth begins to emerge: the fundamental nature of a covenantal relationship requires faithful partners. The Scriptures declare God to be a faithful partner (cf., Deut. 7:9; Ps. 36:5; Lam. 3:22-23; 1 Cor. 1:9). The extent of His faithfulness toward humanity is revealed in his redemptive work. This redemptive work is captured in narratives in order to show us unambiguously both the good and bad examples of what human response to this work is all about.

### God's Redemptive Work

God's redemptive work is revealed in the story of God's meeting with the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai. Kaiser refers to the book of the Exodus as the "heart of the Torah" because of the extensive treatment of three major themes: (1) God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt; (2) God's revelation of himself in covenant, law, and tabernacling presence at Sinai; and (3) the wandering in the wilderness.<sup>59</sup> A major focus of this "heart of the Torah" is the story of a God-initiated, Moses-mediated covenant with Israel established at Mount Sinai. In an overview of the book of Exodus, Pratt notes "it focuses especially on Israel's deliverance from Egypt under Moses' leadership, *and the legal and cultic order he mediated in the Sinai covenant*" (*italics added*).<sup>60</sup> God's covenant with Israel:

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<sup>59</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Genesis - Numbers, The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1990) 287.

<sup>60</sup> Richard L. Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives*, Brentwood, Tenn., 1990 (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, Wolgemuth & Hyatt 1993) 282.

... called for obedience (19:5a), and its purpose was to set Israel apart as a special people, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (vv. 5b-6) ... This covenant was intended as a fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (2:24), but later in Exodus (chap. 32) it became clear that Israel could not obey this covenant, even while they were at Mount Sinai ... any hope of for the future would have to rest in the establishment of a new covenant.<sup>61</sup>

The narrative of God's covenant with Israel at mount Sinai is a foundational story in God's redemptive work in and through Israel.

Moses had experienced a miraculous God-encounter while tending his father-in-law's sheep on the backside of the desert (Exod. 3:1). God called to him from a burning bush announcing his intention to rescue the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and bring them to "a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites" (3:8). Moses would play a lead role in God's rescue plan: "I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt" (3:10). Following some reluctance on Moses part, God persuaded him to return to Egypt supported by his brother Aaron. Upon their return, in an act of obedience, Moses and Aaron announced to Pharaoh that the God of Israel said that he, Pharaoh, needed to let the Israelites go so that they could hold a festival in the desert (5:1). Not surprisingly, Pharaoh declined their initiative by increasing the misery of the Israelite's bondage. Responding to Pharaoh's resistance, God announced to Moses: "Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country" (6:1). The revelation of

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<sup>61</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992) 282.



God's mighty hand included a series of miraculous plagues, predicted by Moses, which brought judgment on the Egyptians while sparing the Israelites. The final plague, which accomplished Israel's release from Egyptian bondage, resulted in the death of every Egyptian firstborn. The Israelites escaped this fate by smearing the blood of a year-old male lamb or goat without defect on the doorframes of their homes. For Israel, this Passover meal became an annual reminder of God's deliverance from Egyptian bondage. Their journey from Egypt through the desert to Mount Sinai began with a miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. The Egyptians, having changed their mind about freeing the Israelites from slavery, pursued them. Faced with the possibility of being recaptured, God instructed Moses to stretch out his hand over the Red Sea. In response to Moses' act of obedience the waters parted and all Israel crossed through the Red Sea on dry land. When the Egyptian army attempted to follow God intervened and the waters returned to their place so that the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea did not survive (14:28). Three months after this series of miraculous events culminated with a supernatural escape from Egypt through the Red Sea, Israel arrived at Mount Sinai.

At Mount Sinai, the situation has its own unique features, which stand out as highpoints of the entire Bible. In Exodus 19:3-6, God, through his spokesman Moses, reminds Israel of what they had seen him do "to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." The eagle metaphor is developed further in Deuteronomy 32:11, where the loving compassion, protection, strength, and watchfulness of God is compared to the attributes of this majestic bird.<sup>62</sup> "I carried you" and "brought you to myself" are declarations of God's redemptive actions on Israel's behalf. Following

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<sup>62</sup> Kaiser Jr., *Genesis - Numbers* 415.

this reminder God announces his desire to renew his covenant with them: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession” (vs. 5). God’s covenant with Israel called for obedience. “The *obligation* laid upon Israel was obedience (Exod. 19:5, 8; 24:7; Deut. 4:23) to God’s law—both to the Decalogue (Exod. 20:3-17) and to its elaboration in the “Book of the Covenant” (Exod. 20:22-23:33; see 24:7).”<sup>63</sup> “If you obey me fully and keep my covenant” defined, for these wilderness refugees, what human action is required in becoming a faithful covenantal partner with God.

Preparing Israel to “obey Him fully” and to “keep His covenant,” however, took 11 months and 6 days and occupies a large portion of Scripture stretching from Exodus 19:1 through to Numbers 10:10. “Nowhere else in the Old Testament is there found such a huge presentation of traditions, made up of so many strands, and attached to one single event (the revelation at Sinai).”<sup>64</sup> Goldberg explains what he means when referring to “Israel’s master story of the Exodus”: “By “master story,” I mean the kind of core, foundational narrative that, in providing a community with its paradigmatic model for understanding the world and ... guide for acting in it ... simultaneously gives rise to that community’s most elementary, and often most distinctive, convictions about reality.”<sup>65</sup> Sinai became a defining moment in the history of a people who left Egypt with no law, national identity, true understanding of who God was, or the manner of life He required.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Lewis and Demarest, *Volume Three* 323.

<sup>64</sup> Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 187.

<sup>65</sup> Michael Goldberg, "God, Action, and Narrative: Which Narrative? Which Action? Which God?" *The Journal of Religion* 68.1 Jan. 1988: 39-56, *JSTOR* <<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=00224189%28198801%2968%3A1%3C39%3AGAANWN%3E2.0.CO%3B2-P>>.

<sup>66</sup> Leon Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970) 143.

Mount Sinai offered the ideal setting for God to prepare these descendants of Abraham for a renewal of his covenant. The remoteness of the location served to minimize the potential for distractions as God delivered the Law and ratified the “Mosaic covenant.” The “Mosaic Covenant” is a label often used to distinguish this event from the earlier “Abrahamic covenant.” Kaiser addresses the “troublesome contrast” between these two covenant occasions: “Far from being a legalistic code or a hypothetical means of earning one’s salvation, the law was a means of maintaining fellowship with Yahweh—not the grounds of establishing it.”<sup>67</sup>

The story of God’s covenant with Israel at Sinai reaches its climax at the ratification ceremony as told in Exodus 24:4-8. Goldberg clarifies the significance of this event as it relates to the unfolding story of redemption: “From the vantage point of Sinai, standing at the center of the Exodus narrative, whatever salvation is wrought by God is never worked by him alone but always *in conjunction with* and *on condition of* some mutual action by human beings.”<sup>68</sup> The unfortunate reality is that Israel’s story became characterized by her failure to remain a faithful covenant partner.

The story of God’s new covenant in Jesus Christ, according to promise but also necessitated by Israel’s inability to remain a faithful covenantal partner, is a further expression of God’s redemptive work. The divine intention to establish a new covenant was announced by Old Testament prophets. The word of the Lord revealed to Jeremiah announced a “new covenant” would be made in the future and this new covenant “will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt” (Jer. 31:31-32).

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<sup>67</sup> Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* 62.

<sup>68</sup> Goldberg, “God, action, and narrative: which narrative? which action? which God?” 49.

While the prophetic books supply only occasional and scant narrative, there are multiple allusions to the events portrayed in the historical narratives of Scripture. The book that bears the prophet Isaiah's name contains a prophetic narrative of a "suffering servant" on whom "the Lord has laid the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). Baxter is willing to concede, "That there may have been a primary and more superficial reference to the exiled nation; but the truer, deeper, fuller, and final reference to Christ is so emphatic that none but the willfully blind can fail to see it."<sup>69</sup> This story predicts the arrival of Israel's Messiah as "the man of sorrows" seven hundred years prior to the Bethlehem narrative. This "suffering servant" will be rejected, afflicted, despised, falsely accused, and finally put to death "for the transgressions of my people" (Isa. 53:8).

Isaiah 53 tells a story of God's redemptive work, that at the time of its writing, is a revelation of what will happen, rather than a report of what has happened. "Nothing could more graphically portray the vicarious sacrificial work of Christ who bore the penalty of man's sin so that man may receive God's righteousness and stand justified before him."<sup>70</sup> The immediate sign of a redemptive work of God in the lives of the original recipients was an injection of hope. The prophetic narrative, however, also predicted a delayed redemptive work of God in the lives of distant recipients when the realization of the hope was the Word become flesh and blood, dwelling among them.

A narrative of events that tell of a "special" revelation of God in which there is a person-to-person encounter is a divine act of redemptive work. Returning to the story of Jacob and Esau, after a twenty-year absence, Jacob was attempting to be reunited with his

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<sup>69</sup> Sidlow J. Baxter, *Explore the Book: A Basic and Broadly Interpretive Course of Bible Study from Genesis to Revelation*, 10th, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974) 253.

<sup>70</sup> Lewis and Demarest, *Volume Three* 387.

estranged brother Esau when he becomes engaged in an all-night wrestling match (Gen. 32). As the time of Jacob's face-to-face encounter with Esau approached his "great fear and distress" (vs. 7) caused him to send gifts on ahead in hopes of pacifying his older brother (vs. 20). Having sent his family and all his possessions to the other side of the River Jabbok, Jacob was left all alone (vs. 24). The narrative emphasizes Jacob's isolation and aloneness.<sup>71</sup> Now ninety-seven years old and in a desolate place, Jacob is confronted by a stranger ("a man") who engages him in an all night wrestling match. Jacob proved to be more than a match for the stranger who resorted to touching Jacob's hip so that his hip joint was wrenched and permanently lamed (vs. 25).

The wrestling match was never intended to become the "main event" of this short narrative.<sup>72</sup> It's about a new way of God bringing blessing to Jacob. Although physically disadvantaged, and then handicapped, Jacob refused to surrender without receiving the stranger's blessing. Jacob demonstrated the value of undivided commitment and perseverance and through this he received the blessing. Accepting the name change God had for him from "Jacob" to "Israel" was indicative of his character (cf. Gen. 25:26).<sup>73</sup> Jacob's new name carried a new message: "You have struggled with God and with men and have overcome" (32:28). Jacob emerged victorious in his struggle with both contenders. The mystery man blessed him. Jacob by naming the place "Peniel" indicates his wrestling opponent's identity for the first time in the story: "I saw God face to face" (vs. 30). The Old Testament prophet Hosea recalled that the wrestling match featured Jacob and "the angel" (Hosea 12:4); but we know that this generic term can also be a role

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<sup>71</sup> Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* 445.

<sup>72</sup> Walton, *Genesis* 605.

<sup>73</sup> Walton, *Genesis* 606.

played by God or man. Jacob enters the story fearful, distressed and all alone and emerges from his trials with God's blessing and intimate friendship.

Once the divine act of redemptive work as a result of this encounter with God is concluded, Jacob limps away with a new name that announces him as an "over-comer" along with the assurance of God's blessing in his continuing presence and protection. So the story is not about winning or losing a physical wrestling match but about a person-to-person encounter with God. The mark of God's redemptive work is stamped upon Jacob's life as "Israel" and as the patriarch lamed by God.

Turning to the story of "Moses and the burning bush" we are presented with another face-to-face encounter with God (Exod. 3). The stage for this encounter was set when Moses fled from Egypt to "the far side of the desert," started a new life, and was to be found tending his father-in-law's sheep. With the desert as his situation in life, Moses became the recipient of God's self-revealing miracle. At the same time, the descendants of Abraham were suffering under oppressive, Egyptian bondage (v. 7). Beyond the wonder of a flaming bush that is not consumed and the realization of treading upon "holy ground," God revealed a massive redemptive plan to take place through Moses. Moses considers yielding to the plan and asks for the name of God that he is to announce to his people. The response: "I am who I am" (vs. 14). The self-designation connotes that the God of Israel is the living, all-powerful one who is concerned with everything his people are experiencing. The Moses and burning bush event became a narrative that is a highpoint in *the story of redemption*.

In the concluding passages of the Pentateuch, Moses' epitaph contains the phrase "whom the LORD knew *face to face*" (Deut. 34:10 *italics added*). The phrase "face to

face” indicates extraordinary divine/human intimacy. Friendship with God includes this “face to face” relationship (cf. Exod. 33:11). God’s “face to face” relationship with Moses facilitated acts of divine self-disclosure that enabled Moses to become a mediator of God’s special revelations to all of Israel. The story of God’s redemptive work was always the record of these divine encounters.

The story of God’s unique authorship: his writing of the Decalogue, presents a form of special revelation unlike any other mentioned in Scripture. An original copy of the Ten Commandments was God-inscribed for Moses on two stone tablets as he stood near the top of Mount Sinai (Exod. 31:18; Deut. 9:10). The declarative phrase “written by the finger of God” leaves no doubt as to the production of the tablets. Revelation and creation are fused together by God in order to entrust to Moses the most special communication to the nation of Israel. The Decalogue revealed both the nature of Israel’s God and the standard of obedience required of Israel if they were to remain faithful covenant partners with their Holy God. God’s action of writing and presenting the Decalogue to Moses for the nation of Israel was an incomparable event. The narrative that tells of this event communicates yet another episode in the story of God’s redemptive work and covenantal partnership with his people.

Old Testament narrative literature tells of events that involve human and divine actions. The narratives of these events provide a divinely inspired history of the relationship between the two members of the covenant, God and Israel, established and defined by God and recorded in this story. Because the relationship between God and Israel, as defined by the covenant, required the partners to remain faithful to one another,

the history of the relationship, which survived so much unfaithfulness on Israel's part, became the Story of Redemption to all nations.

## THE INSPIRATION AND AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

We have been developing this theological foundation for the study of biblical narratives in order to get a proper evangelical orientation to the task. There are multiple competing approaches to narrative and not all of them are compatible with an evangelical perspective. One of the ways to clarify this perspective is to revisit the doctrine of biblical inspiration, particularly at the points where the text does not directly contain doctrinal statements but are nevertheless equally valuable with those portions that do. There is a tendency to privilege doctrinal and propositional Scripture passages and to reduce the narratives to such forms. By accepting their inspiration, the Old Testament narratives demand their own special treatment according to their purpose and content. This factor has been essential to highlight in this chapter.

The act of God inscribing the first edition of the Decalogue is one of the great stories of God's favor in producing a written revelation independent of human initiative and yet totally on behalf of human beings, specifically, of Israel, His beloved people (Exod. 31:18). Throughout the Scriptures, there is no comparable scenario of divine inscription to this one. God, however, regularly chose to employ human authors as inspired instruments for his written Word. The *inspiration of Scripture* refers to the spiritual activity of God that ensured that what the human authors wrote was indeed the Word of God. And related to the inspiration of Scripture is its authority.

The *authority of the Scripture* refers to the capacity of these divinely inspired texts to define, develop, and direct our understanding and covenantal relationship to God



and to his creation (including ourselves). Packer acknowledges the close relationship between inspiration and authority of Scripture when he asserts that a clear grasp of the meaning of the first truth goes a long way toward resolving issues associated with the second truth.<sup>74</sup> Leon Morris refers to the Bible as “the decisive revelation, the authoritative deposit of the Christian faith.”<sup>75</sup> Warfield’s definition of inspiration makes reference to Divine authority: “the Biblical writers are called inspired as breathed into by the Holy Spirit, so that the product of their activities transcends human powers and becomes Divinely authoritative.”<sup>76</sup> Common to these and other expositions of doctrine, we see how inspiration and the authority of Scripture are inseparably related.

### The Inspiration of Scripture

The inspiration of the Scripture involved human authors who were moved by God to produce a form of his Word as a text written in human language and supremely meaningful to human beings. Brown, in his review of Basil Manly’s book, The Biblical Doctrine of Inspiration Explained and Vindicated, includes Manly’s definition of inspiration as “divine influence that secures the accurate transference of truth into human language by a speaker or writer, so as to be communicated to other men.”<sup>77</sup> McGrath turns to the major confessional documents of both Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions to demonstrate the “general Christian consensus” concerning the inspiration

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<sup>74</sup> J.I. Packer, *God Has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible* (Great Britain: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1979) 102.

<sup>75</sup> Leon Morris, *I Believe in Revelation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976) 85.

<sup>76</sup> B.B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Phillipsburg, N.J.: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948) 131.

<sup>77</sup> Charles Rufus Brown, "The Biblical Doctrine of Inspiration," *The Old Testament Student* 8.3 Nov 1888: 105-07, *JSTOR*  
<<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=01905945%28188811%298%3A3%3C105%3ATBD0I%3E2.0.CO%3B2-D>>.

and authority of Scripture. He includes, as an example, an excerpt from the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in which the inspiration of Scripture is defined: “To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their own faculties and powers so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more.”<sup>78</sup> Erickson’s title of a chapter dealing with inspiration refers to it as the “preservation of revelation” and then gives the following definition: “By inspiration of the Scripture we mean that supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit upon the Scripture writers which rendered their writings as an accurate record of the revelation or which resulted in what they wrote actually being the word of God.”<sup>79</sup> The inspiration of Scripture originates with the gracious initiative of God to involve human instruments in a process whereby his divine revelation would be preserved in written form.

One of the most vivid biblical examples of the inspiration of Scripture is an actual narrative found within the prophetic book of Jeremiah. In an act of obedience to a direct command of God to “take a scroll and write on it all the words I have spoken to you concerning Israel, Judah and the other nations,” Jeremiah “called Baruch son of Neriah, and while Jeremiah dictated all the words the Lord had spoken to him, Baruch wrote them on the scroll” (Jer. 36:2, 4). Feinberg attributes significance to this chapter of Jeremiah by noting that it “contains a unique description of the writing of a substantial portion of God’s Word.”<sup>80</sup> Craigie confirms the uniqueness of this “description of the

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<sup>78</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., 2001 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001) 177.

<sup>79</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (1983-1985. 3 vols.; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1992), 199.

<sup>80</sup> Charles L. Feinberg, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982) 603.

actual production of a written oracle” as reported in the book of Jeremiah.<sup>81</sup> In compliance with a direct command from God, Jeremiah enlisted a scribe to “secure the accurate transference of truth” by inscribing the words that God had spoken to him onto a scroll. One advantage that this God-directed action afforded was soon realized:

Then Jeremiah told Baruch, “I am restricted; I cannot go to the temple. So you go to the house of the Lord on a day of fasting and read to the people from the scroll the words of the Lord that you wrote as I dictated. Read them to all the people of Judah who come in from their towns.

(Jer. 36:5-6)

The word of God to Jeremiah could now be accurately transported and delivered to others by Baruch in Jeremiah’s absence. God’s Word was now accessible to many in a stable textual form and thus transportable. King Jehoiakim, however, took exception to the words that had been written on the scroll and ordered it to be burned (36:23). God once again commanded Jeremiah to write the words he had spoken on a scroll so that the scroll that King Jehoiakim had destroyed in the fire was reproduced (36:28). “So Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to the scribe Baruch son of Neriah, and as Jeremiah dictated, Baruch wrote on it all the words of the scroll that Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire. *And many similar words were added to them*” (36:32 *italics added*). Not only was the original scroll reproduced but Jeremiah also, under divine influence, dictated additional information to the scribe Baruch who inscribed them on the new scroll.

Thompson points out that “we have no means of knowing what this additional material

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<sup>81</sup> Peter Craige, *Jeremiah 26-52* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1995), vol. 27 of *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker 203.

comprised”<sup>82</sup> but the new oracle of doom against king Jehoiakim was obviously included as additional material. Jeremiah was not the only human author who was commanded by God to write the words of God in a permanent textual form so that they could be communicated to other readers and hearers.

Returning to the example of Moses, after God’s miraculous deliverance of Israel from Egyptian oppression and enslavement, Moses led the people through the wilderness of Sinai toward the Promised Land of Canaan. Exodus 17 tells the story of an unprovoked Amalekite attack on the Israelites at Rephidim. Deuteronomy 25 recalls this event as an Amalekite attempt to take advantage of Israelite vulnerability: “When you were weary and worn out” (vs. 18). Fretheim draws the conclusion that with the Amalekite effort to “exterminate” the people of God they became “an embodiment of evil, Pharaoh revisited, a veritable Hitlerian specter,” threatening the plans and purposes of God.<sup>83</sup> The primary function of this episode, therefore, testifies to the benefits and proof of God’s presence with Israel.<sup>84</sup> As a result of God’s presence with Israel Joshua and the Israelites were able to overcome their vulnerability and prevail over this external threat (17:13). Following their victory “the Lord said to Moses, ‘Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven’” (17:14). Kaiser gives credence to this biblical account by reporting that there is now archaeological evidence to support men writing for a millennium and a half prior to Moses’ day in answer to the charge that writing was not

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<sup>82</sup> J.A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. R.K. Harrison (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980) 629.

<sup>83</sup> Terence Fretheim, *Exodus: Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991) 194.

<sup>84</sup> John I. Durham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Exodus*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1987) 234.

invented until after Moses' lifetime.<sup>85</sup> God's prompting of Moses secured an accurate transference of the truth about this event in writing.

The scroll, on which the details of the event were recorded, provided a means of remembering the benefits and proof of God's presence with Israel in the battle at Rephidim. "Write it down so you don't forget!" would be a more contemporary way of saying this. Jeremiah and Moses were made aware of God's desire to produce a written record of his words and/or actions by way of a direct order to write them on a scroll. On other occasions the divine initiative that influenced human authors to record the words of God was the result of an unconscious influence from within as the author was "carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21). Regardless of how the divine influence was exercised, whether direct or more subtle, God influenced human authors to write down his words and/or his actions in a retrievable format so that His Word and its truth could be preserved and accurately communicated to others.

Israel's responsiveness to these written documents demonstrated an acceptance of them as the Word of God. During the time of the Israel's exodus from Egypt and sojourn in the wilderness, Moses functioned as a mediator between God and Israel. God spoke to Moses and then Moses communicated God's message to the Israelites.

When Moses went and *told* the people all the LORD's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything the LORD has said we will do." *Moses then wrote down everything* the LORD had said. ... The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and commands *I have written* for their instruction." (Exod. 24:3-4, 12 *italics* added)

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<sup>85</sup> Kaiser Jr., *Genesis - Numbers* 409.

Moses functioned as God's spokesperson. He was also a human author under divine influence, who, along with God, co-authored the Book of the Law, or as it is alternatively referred to, the Book of the Covenant. Israel's response to this written version of God's word is noteworthy: "Then he [Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, 'We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey'" (Exod. 24:7). The Israelite response to Moses' communication of the words and laws of God remained consistent; whether communicated orally or read from the written version (the Book of the Covenant). Durham makes the observation that as Moses read from the newly written Book of the Covenant the Israelites not only responded with the set phrase of commitment but also "added here the additional assurance that they will pay attention and take seriously the words of Yahweh."<sup>86</sup> Israel's responsiveness to both oral and written presentations demonstrated an acceptance of both of these forms of communication as the word of God to them. Jeremiah and Moses serve as two examples of individuals who were enabled by God to author divinely inspired written documents that preserved an accurate transference of the words of God in human language that could then be communicated to others.

Joshua, as Moses' replacement following his death, handled the written words of God in a way that demonstrated the value he placed on the entire compellation:

Afterward, Joshua read *all* the words of the law—the blessings and the curses—*just as it is written* in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of *all* that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the aliens who lived among them. (Joshua 8:34-35 *italics* added)

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<sup>86</sup> Durham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Exodus* 343.

The Israelites were now in the Promised Land. This was a new generation from the one that had accompanied Moses at Mount Sinai. Joshua, in obedience to God's previous directive (Deut. 27:1-26), assembled the nation so that they could hear the requirements and promises written in the Book of the Law. Following the reading of "all the words of the law" the Israelites renewed their commitment to be a faithful covenant partner with God. Wood points out that the ceremony surrounding this event would have left an indelible mark on the memories of this new generation of Israelites.<sup>87</sup>

Ezra, another leader of Israel (but in post-exilic times), also assembled and read to the people "the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel" (Neh. 8:1). Worthy of note is how this reference implies a dual authorship in the production of the Book of Moses. Ezra took this document and read it aloud from daybreak till noon "and all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law" (8:1-3). Williamson identifies "the unity of theme in the chapter, namely Ezra reading and explaining the Law (with Levitical assistance) and the people responding willingly to its demands."<sup>88</sup> The Scripture includes numerous narratives where, initially, during Moses' lifetime, and then later, long after his death, Israel accepted what had been preserved textually as Moses' written version of the Book of the Law as the words of God to them.

Two principal New Testament passages illuminating the origin of the Scriptures as a result of events where divine and human initiative are involved: first of all, 2 Timothy 3:16. This passage, which speaks of the Scripture as "God-breathed"

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<sup>87</sup> Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History* 178.

<sup>88</sup> H.G.M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, Vol. 16 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1985) 280.

(*theopneustos*), is indispensable to any discussion of the manner of inspiration and the significance attached to it.<sup>89</sup>

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

The apostle Paul urges young Timothy to continue in what he has been taught from the “holy Scriptures” (v.15) because of the equipping capability of these divinely inspired or “God-breathed” documents. God-breathed is a defining characteristic of Scripture. If “all” Scripture is God-breathed then no Scripture exists that is not God-breathed. Using this particular terminology the apostle Paul is implying that God’s action in producing the “holy Scriptures” was comparable to the divine action involved in breathing the breath of life into man (cf., Gen. 2:7). Erickson is in agreement: “They are divinely produced, just as God breathed the breath of life into man (Gen. 2:7).”<sup>90</sup> Both events, breathing into man’s nostrils the breath of life and producing the written words of God, were the result of the breath of God.

Now, human authors may produce inspiring documents but that does not mean that these documents are “God-breathed.” The apostle Paul’s description in 2 Timothy 3 does not say that God breathed *into* the words of the biblical authors so that they *became* the word of God. Warfield clarifies the supernatural-ness of the event by noting that the Greek term does not imply *inspiring* or *inspiration*: “it only speaks of a ‘spiring’ or ‘spiration.’” What it says of Scripture is, not that it is ‘breathed into by God’ or that it is

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<sup>89</sup> McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* 176.

<sup>90</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology* 202.



the product of the Divine “inbreathing” into its human authors, but that it is breathed out by God ... the product of the creative breath of God.”<sup>91</sup> Neither is the phrase “all Scripture is God-breathed” followed-up with any kind of description of how God operated in producing them. The apostle Paul is content to leave Timothy with an authoritative declaration, which identifies the divine author of the co-authored Jewish Scriptures. The inspiration of Scripture is therefore synonymous with the Pauline concept: “God-breathed.” If it is not God-breathed then it is not to be regarded as Scripture.

The second principal New Testament passage used to endorse the inspiration of Scripture is 2 Peter 1:20-21. This passage switches the spotlight away from the human authors and makes the divine action the focal point of the event.<sup>92</sup>

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Knowing that prophets did not deliver prophetic Scripture independently or at their own initiative is a “primary thing.”<sup>93</sup> If these men were not the source of the prophecy of Scripture then from where did it come? Peter’s statement “men spoke from God” declares that prophecy of Scripture originates with God and is delivered by God’s spokesman: the prophet. Jeremiah was an Old Testament spokesman for God: “You must ... say whatever I command you ... Now, I have put my words in your mouth” (Jer. 1:7,9). The

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<sup>91</sup> Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* 133.

<sup>92</sup> Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981) 977.

<sup>93</sup> Edwin A. Blum, “2 Peter,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981) 275.

anthropomorphism, “the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth,” was a powerful way of saying that God was personally involved in placing his words in Jeremiah’s mouth.<sup>94</sup> King David, in his “last words,” as recorded in the book of 2 Samuel confessed: “The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me; his word was on my tongue” (23:2). It was not David’s words but the Spirit of the Lord’s word that was on David’s tongue. The Holy Spirit “carried along” these spokesmen of God and their messages were an accurate transmission, in human language, of the word of God. Green explains the “maritime metaphor in verse 21 (cf. Acts 27:15, 17, where the same word, *pheromenē*, is used of a ship carried along by the wind). The prophets raised their sails, so to speak (they were obedient and receptive), and the Holy Spirit filled them and carried their craft along in the direction he wished.”<sup>95</sup> Bloesch states the final destination of this “sailing expedition” candidly: “Scripture is not simply the Word of God or human words but the Word of God *in* human words.”<sup>96</sup> God not only prompted the human authors to write his words but, by way of the Holy Spirit’s influence, he remained intimately involved in the writing process. God’s ongoing involvement in the production of these writings ensured that the written message was an accurate record of what he intended to communicate.

Even a casual reading of 2 Timothy 3:16 seems to offer an all-inclusive approach to the nature and scope of inspiration. But upon closer examination of the original language, we uncover some ambiguity. The opening phrase in the original language offers two equally plausible translations: “all (every) Scripture is God-breathed and is

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<sup>94</sup> Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* 149.

<sup>95</sup> Michael Green, *The Second Epistle of Peter and the Epistle of Jude*, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, ed. Leon Morris, Vol. 18 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979) 91.

<sup>96</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration & Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994) 88.

profitable” or “all (every) God-breathed Scripture is also profitable.” The former affirms the inspiration of all Scripture. The latter implies a distinction between God-breathed and non-God-breathed Scripture by emphasizing the potential benefit of God-breathed Scripture. The two possible placements of “God-breathed” produces an “active” or “passive” sense. In an active sense it would mean that all Scripture is inspiring. The passive sense would mean that all Scripture comes from God. The text does not allow for a conclusive end to this debate, however, Collins reports that the passive sense (i.e. all Scripture comes from God) was the preferred interpretation amongst the early church fathers.<sup>97</sup>

An examination of the wider context into which 2 Timothy 3:16 is set provides some additional insights. Timothy has been exposed to these “holy Scriptures” from infancy. Those responsible for Timothy’s exposure were well known to him as credible and faithful witnesses (cf. 2 Tim. 1:5). The content of these Scriptures have already left their mark on young Timothy’s life and the apostle Paul is encouraging him to continue to allow them to have their “teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” influence. Although both translations of the original language may be equally plausible, the context suggests that the apostle Paul was not making a distinction between God-breathed and non-God-breathed but was affirming that “all Scripture is God-breathed.” Erickson agrees that it is unlikely that the apostle Paul was attempting to make a distinction between inspired and uninspired Scripture. “What does appear from the context is that Paul had in mind a definite body of writings known to Timothy from his

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<sup>97</sup> Raymond F. Collins, *I and II Timothy and Titus: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002) 263.

childhood.”<sup>98</sup> Fee views this verse, not as offering a theory of inspiration, but “reflecting the common tradition of Judaism” when it comes to their attitude toward their Scriptures.<sup>99</sup> In Timothy’s historic setting the apostle Paul would be referring specifically to the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures.

The extent or scope of inspiration can extend to the minutest details of these written documents. The Israelites having received the Book of the Covenant were expected to obey “all the *words* of this law” (Deut. 28:58; 2 Kings 22:13 *italics* added). The apostle Paul based his entire argument in Galatians 3:16 on the difference between a singular (“seed”) and a plural (“seeds”) as recorded in Genesis 12:7, 13:15, and 17:7. Erickson draws the conclusion that the New Testament writers’ attention to Old Testament details is evidence that “they obviously regarded the choice of words and even the form of the words as having been guided by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>100</sup> Jesus, in reference to the Old Testament Scripture says: “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matt. 5:18). Bruce clarifies the significance of Jesus’ words: “Jesus expresses here in the strongest manner His conviction that the whole O.T. is a Divine revelation, and that therefore every minutest precept has religious significance which must be recognized in the ideal fulfillment.”<sup>101</sup> The scope of divine inspiration during the writing of the Law, as understood and expressed by Jesus, extended to the very letters. Luke’s account of the life and ministry of Jesus contains a similar

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<sup>98</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology* 210.

<sup>99</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 229.

<sup>100</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology* 213.

<sup>101</sup> Alexander Balmain Bruce, *The Synoptic Gospels, The Gospel of St. John, The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983) 104.

quote: “It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law” (Luke 16:17). The inspiration of Scripture is not limited to ideas and concepts or to the words or even letters but extends to “the least stroke of a pen.” God engaged the human authors of the Scriptures in a way that ensured that what they wrote of his words and his actions was an accurate transference of the truth that he wanted to communicate through human language.

### The Authority of Scripture

Identifying the inspiration of Scripture makes the authority of Scripture unavoidable. The prophetic or God-inspired word, delivered by human authors, is “timelessly authoritative.”<sup>102</sup> while being very much temporal as a collection of texts written and transmitted under specific circumstances. The God who inspired the human authors to write his written revelation is the supreme One to whom humanity is ultimately accountable. “So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:12). The Bible, as the written expression of the supreme God’s revelation to humanity, possesses the right to define, develop, and direct our understanding and relationship to him and his creation (including ourselves).<sup>103</sup> Morris advises that the authority of the God-inspired written revelation should take precedence over the inerrancy discussions. The Bible does not appear to claim inerrancy for itself but it does, however, place a great deal of emphasis on truth. The Scriptures present the divine author to be “the God of truth” (Isa. 65:16). Jesus Christ, “the exact representation of his [God’s] being” (Heb. 1:3), claimed to be “the way and *the truth* and the life” (John 14:6 *italics* added).

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<sup>102</sup> Albert E. Barnett, *James - Revelation, The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, Vol. 12 (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1957) 185.

<sup>103</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology* 241.

Inerrancy does, however, help establish credibility and as a result trust in the God who supernaturally preserved his revelation in the Scriptures. Morris, concludes his discussion on the authority of the Bible, advocating “the traditional position: we can still regard the Bible as reliable and use it as our authoritative standard.”<sup>104</sup> Reporting on the supreme authority for the church of the Reformation Bloesch references the Westminster Confession declaration of the Scriptures being “the Supreme Judge.”<sup>105</sup> Davis presents the Reformation’s *sola scriptura* principle as reaffirming “the authority of the risen and reigning Christ, the sole King of the church, mediated through the inspired and infallible word of Scripture.”<sup>106</sup> Lloyd-Jones is quoted by Bloesch at the beginning of a presentation on the inspiration of Scripture: “The authority of the Scripture is not a matter to be defended so much as to be asserted ... We need to remind ourselves frequently that it is the preaching and exposition of the Bible that really establishes its truth and authority.”<sup>107</sup> In the final analysis, the authority of the Scripture is established on the supremacy of the God who supernaturally inspired them.

## PNEUMATOLOGY OF INTERPRETATION

The process of communication is a complex activity. The first challenge originates with the sender: effectively transmitting the intended communication. The second challenge belongs to the recipient: hearing what the sender intended to communicate. Erickson comments accordingly on God’s attempt to communicate with humanity:

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<sup>104</sup> Morris, *I Believe in Revelation* 137.

<sup>105</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration & Interpretation* 159.

<sup>106</sup> John Jefferson Davis, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984) 71.

<sup>107</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration & Interpretation* 85.

Revelation is God's making his truth known to man. Inspiration preserves it, making it more widely accessible. Inspiration guarantees that what the Bible says is just what God would say if he were to speak directly .... For the Bible to function as if it is God speaking to us, the Bible reader needs to understand the meaning of the Scriptures, and to be convinced of their divine origin and authorship.<sup>108</sup>

God the Holy Spirit's *presence* and *illuminating influence* facilitates the communication process by helping Bible readers to hear what God intended and intends readers to hear. In other words, the same Spirit that inspired the Scriptures helps believing readers to understand their meaning, which of course includes the Old Testament narratives.

#### The Holy Spirit's Presence with all Believers

Scripture itself reports the Holy Spirit's enabling influence upon believers. Moses and the Israelites experienced this enabling presence following their departure from Sinai, the mountain of God. A wave of complaints had swept through the Israelite camp on account of the constant diet of manna (God's miraculous provision for their physical nourishment). The Lord became "exceedingly angry" and Moses was "troubled" with the Israelites' complaints and demands for the kind of food they had enjoyed back in Egypt (Num. 11:10b). Moses expressed his frustration to the Lord: "I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me" (Num. 11:14). So heavily did this weigh on him, in fact, that if circumstances did not improve, then Moses expressed a desire for the escape that death offered. God's response to Moses' cry for relief involved not only a promise to provide meat but the taking of the Spirit that was on him and

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<sup>108</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology* 246.

putting it on seventy of Israel's elders, whom Moses would identify as leaders in the Israelite community. And so Moses brought the 70 elders together around the Tabernacle and the narrative describes how the Lord took of the Spirit that was on Moses and "put the Spirit on the seventy elders" (Num. 11:25).

The recipients of the Spirit prophesied at that time as a visible and more importantly audible manifestation of Spirit's influence. Two men who had stayed behind in the camp instead of coming to the Tabernacle also prophesied as the Spirit "rested" on them. When Joshua objects that somehow these two are behaving in an improper manner, Moses actually endorses the behavior of the two non-conformists who had not gathered with the rest of the 70 elders by expressing hope that all Israel would become prophets: "Are you jealous for my sake? *I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!*" (Num. 11:29 *italics added*). The connection is made between having authority, making right judgments before God, and being anointed with God's Spirit. Thus early in the history of Israel we see how important a role the Holy Spirit has to exercise in the lives of leaders.

The Old Testament stories describing Saul and David's appointments as kings of Israel bring the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit into bold relief. Initially the prophet Samuel was reluctant to accommodate Israel's demand for a king so that they could be like other nations. However, after consulting with the Lord, he received instruction to "give them a king" (1 Sam. 8:21). Saul is introduced at the very beginning of the story as "an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites" (9:2). The tension in the story, however, is maintained by the lingering thought of Samuel's initial, decisively negative response to the Israelites' request for a king. Would he follow his own good



judgment or obey God and defer to the people's request? As the story unfolds, Samuel and Saul's paths eventually cross and Samuel receives a message directly from the Lord: "This is the man I spoke to you about; he will govern my people" (9:17). As a result, in a private ceremony, Samuel anointed Saul and informed him that the Lord had appointed him to be the leader of Israel. Then, before they parted company, Samuel told Saul of a series of "signs" that were fulfilled that very day (1 Sam. 10:9). One of those "signs" involved joining a procession of prophets in their prophesying. Indeed, this was considered so significant that a saying arose in Israel that "Saul is among the prophets" (10:12). Here again, the ability to prophesy provided a visible manifestation that the Spirit of God was present in Saul's life. Following the Lord's rejection of Saul as king of Israel and the departure of the Spirit of God from Saul's life, the influence of the Spirit was associated with Saul's removal from kingship and eventual replacement in the person of David.

The Lord's Spirit revealed to Samuel that Israel's next king would come from the household of Jesse of Bethlehem (1 Sam. 16:1). Having made his way to Bethlehem, the prophet Samuel invited the household of Jesse to join him in a sacrifice to the Lord. As the household of Jesse arrived, Samuel noticed Eliab immediately: "Surely the Lord's anointed stands here before the Lord" (16:6). At this point the Lord intervened in the selection process by informing Samuel that he should not base his evaluation on physical appearance alone. Eventually, David, the absent, youngest brother, was sent for. Samuel, in response to the Spirit's prompting, took the horn of oil and anointed David in the presence of his brothers. Although no visible manifestation of the Spirit's presence is reported, 1 Samuel 16:13 reads: "and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon

David in power.” David becomes the model Old Testament believer who loves and serves God from the heart because of the Spirit’s influence upon him. The influential power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers is confirmed in these Old Testament narratives of Israel’s first kings.

Isaiah’s prophecies, included in the Scriptures, acknowledge the guidance of the Spirit of God in the lives of both past and future believers. In Isaiah 63-64, for example, the Old Testament prophet is praying that the Lord would bring about the redemption that He has promised for His people. Included in this prayer are reflections on the Lord’s involvement in Israel’s history. Isaiah admits, that in spite of the Lord’s identification with Israel’s suffering and the deliverance He provided, their forefather’s “rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy and fought against them” (Isa. 63:10). In reference to Israelites who lived in “the days of Moses” Isaiah points out their willingness to acknowledge the Lord “who set his Holy Spirit among them” (63:11) to guide them “like cattle that go down to the plain, they were given rest by the Spirit of the Lord” (63:14). Isaiah’s prophecies, however, did not present a limitation of the Holy Spirit’s guiding presence to Israel’s past. At a time when Israel was facing God’s judgment at the hands of foreign invaders, Isaiah’s message of hope included the Spirit of God. A descendent of Jesse (an extension of King David’s family tree) would arrive and “the Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord” (Isa. 11:2). According to Isaiah, both historic and futuristic perspectives reveal the Holy Spirit’s influence in the lives of believers. If one connects the Messianic promise of the Spirit with the promise revealed in Joel’s prophecy concerning “the day of the Lord” the

Spirit's circle of influence expands: "I will pour out my Spirit on *all* people" (Joel 2:28 *italics* added).

Turning to the New Testament, Jesus instructed His disciples, prior to sending them out on a mission, to be prepared to rely on the Holy Spirit's presence and power. He identified their "target audience" as well. He summarized and clarified the message they were to preach. He listed the provisions they were to take with them (minimal provisions). Jesus then addressed their ministry expectations. How would people receive them? Jesus anticipates the unavoidable opposition they would encounter but assures them that rehearsing what or how they would speak when standing before their opponents and civil authorities would be unnecessary. This is because "the Spirit of your Father" would speak through them (Matt. 10:20). It is worth noting how definite Jesus was: "*At that time* you will be given what to say" (Matt. 10:19 *italics* added). He was referring to the very moment when they would be required to give an account of their ministry. The specific timing of the verbalizing influence of the Holy Spirit is Jesus' intent here.

Jesus' training of His disciples for ministry included an active dependence on the Holy Spirit to work in and through them. Jesus also promised that the Holy Spirit's presence would help them through the grieving process as He prepared them for His imminent departure through suffering, death and resurrection. They had assembled in a rented upper room to celebrate the Passover meal together. Judas had been dismissed earlier to do the necessary preparations, which allowed him the opportunity to betray Jesus. Within the intimate setting of a meal with his closest co-laborers and friends, Jesus announced that his departure was necessary so that he could ask the Father to send the Counselor—the Spirit of truth—"to be with them forever" (John 14:16). Jesus also

alluded to a new experience of the Spirit that would be made available as a result of his departure: “But you know him, for he lives *with* you and *will be in* you” (14:17 *italics* added). The writer of John made a similar reference in an editorial clarification earlier in his biographical account of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ:

On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” *By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.* Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. (John 7:37-39 *italics* added)

But this does not mean that Israel had been lacking in the redemptive work of the Holy Spirit before Christ. James M. Hamilton points to the contention “that the OT has within itself a God-ordained, God-inspired means for the regeneration and sanctification of its saints—a means that allows for the operation of the Spirit upon Old Covenant believers while also allowing the full force of John 7:39, 14:16-17, and 16:7 to stand.”<sup>109</sup>

Regardless of the issues raised by Jesus’ allusions to a new experience, his endorsement of the Spirit’s presence in the lives of his disciples and therefore of all believers is unmistakable and undeniable.

The story of Pentecost (Acts 2) marks the fulfillment of prophecy and the beginning of a “new order” of the Spirit in the lives of believers following Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension. Jesus’ apostles and a number of other disciples were all together when a sound like wind and little flames, something that looked like tongues of

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<sup>109</sup> James M. Hamilton Jr., “Old Covenant Believers and the Indwelling Spirit: A Survey of the Spectrum of Opinion,” *Trinity Journal* 24.1 (Spring 2003): 53.

fire rested on each one of them individually. As a result, all on whom the fire-like tongues came to rest, spoke miraculously in languages other than their own so that God-fearing Jews from many different nations understood them speaking in their local languages. The writer of Acts attributes this whole event to being “filled” and “enabled” by the Holy Spirit to witness to the nations in many languages (Acts 2:4). The truth of the Holy Spirit’s miracle of proclamation and the birth of the church is conveyed in the story of Pentecost. Indeed, in many ways, the entire Acts of the Apostles is the narrative of the Holy Spirit in and through the apostles and the early church.

During the latter stage of the missionary activity of the Apostle Paul, upon his return to the city of Ephesus and the churches he had founded there, he met disciples of John the Baptist who had not received the Holy Spirit (Acts 19). After encouraging them to believe in Jesus and baptizing them in the name of the Lord Jesus the text tells the reader that “the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied” (Acts 19:6). Later in a letter to the church in Ephesus the Apostle Paul points out that believers are “marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance ...” (Eph. 1:13). Woods clarifies the significance of the seal of the Holy Spirit:

We are not to take this as a reference to circumcision (Rom. 4:11) or to the tattooing of devotees at heathen shrines. Nor does Paul have water baptism primarily in mind, but rather what water baptism symbolizes—namely, the promises recorded in the OT and confirmed by Jesus. The Holy Spirit is at once the one promised, and the one in whom the promises are fulfilled. In

view of v. 14, Paul may also be thinking of him as the one who guarantees future promises.<sup>110</sup>

Ephesians 4:30, however, commands the Ephesian believers not to grieve the Spirit that has sealed them. How can believers avoid grieving the Spirit of God? Lincoln explains the prohibition:

It is not a question of some offense aimed directly at the Spirit but rather that believers by committing the sort of sins that have been mentioned in earlier sentences, sins which disrupt communal life, are thereby disrupting and opposing the work of the Spirit in building up the Church ... When believers act in a way that harms their brothers and sisters, God is hurt.<sup>111</sup>

The Holy Spirit's sealing motivates believers to exercise restraint in communicating messages or engaging in activities that may discourage and/or damage interpersonal relationships amongst fellow believers.

On other occasions the Apostle Paul refers to the initiation of the Holy Spirit's relationship with believers as a "baptism." In 1 Corinthians 12:13, for example, we find an inclusive statement: "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink." Earlier in this same letter the believers in Corinth are reminded that they are God's temple in which the Holy Spirit dwells. In his letter to believers in the city of Rome Paul makes the presence of the Holy Spirit the constituting characteristic of a Christian: "You, however, are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God lives in you. But if anyone

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<sup>110</sup> A. Skevington Wood, *Ephesians - Philemon, The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1978) 27.

<sup>111</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians, Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, Vol. 42 (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1990) 307.

does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him” (Rom. 8:9). The apostle Paul’s personal experiences and teachings validate the Holy Spirit’s presence with all believers.

God’s determination to communicate with humanity is accomplished by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all believers, not only to engender proclamation but also every act of spiritual service. Pratt views this as a vital relationship in the interpretive process:

As we prepare to read Old Testament stories, we must realize that it takes tools and power to interpret these texts. Unless we have power, all of our tools will be useless. Likewise, power is of little use without tools. What are the tools of hermeneutics? What is the power? Our hermeneutical tools are the vast array of human knowledge and skills we bring to interpretation. Hermeneutical power is the work of our divine Teacher, the Holy Spirit.<sup>112</sup>

The Spirit’s active presence in the lives of believers offers an interpretive foundation for constructing an appropriate hermeneutical method for understanding biblical narrative.

### The Holy Spirit’s Illumination of Scripture

The Holy Spirit’s illuminating influence in the lives of believers is that of Teacher. As Teacher this illuminating influence “does not deal with the transmission of truth, but with the understanding of truth already revealed.”<sup>113</sup> In a review of the Lord’s compassionate provisions for the nation of Israel during their wilderness sojourn,

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<sup>112</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 3.

<sup>113</sup> Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949) 106.

Nehemiah included in the list: "... your good Spirit to *instruct* them" (Neh. 9:20 *italics* added). The content of the Spirit's instruction is not disclosed but the Spirit's ability to instruct or teach was considered a provision that had sustained God's people as they traveled through the desert on their way to the Promised Land. As Jesus prepared his disciples for events leading up to his death, he promised them that following his departure the Father would send the Holy Spirit to teach them all things and remind them of everything he had said to them (John 14:26). The Spirit's effectiveness as Teacher in fulfilling this promise can be found in a reported concession attributed to "the rulers, elders and teachers of the law in Jerusalem" (Acts 4:5) following an interrogation of Peter and John: "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). The teaching activity of the Spirit had powerfully enabled those whom Jesus had entrusted with the continuation of His ministry initiatives in ways that were recognized by their opponents.

The Apostle John later emphasized the teaching role of the Holy Spirit in a letter to believers who were in danger of being lead astray by false teachers: "You do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him" (1 John 2:27). The apostle is not suggesting that human teachers have become obsolete. The Scriptures show otherwise. Pastors and teachers are gifted agents that God calls and sustains for the church "so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph. 4:12). The recipients of John's letter, however, must beware of false teaching through Gnostic teachers who would claim a "higher knowledge" adding to the Christ-centered teachings on which their faith was



established. 1 Corinthians 2 presents some specific attributes that explain the Spirit's role as Teacher:

*The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God ... no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.* We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in *words taught by the Spirit*, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words (vs. 10-13, *italics added*).

The Holy Spirit's identity and power as God the Spirit provides truth that would otherwise be inaccessible. The Spirit is thus the incomparable and necessary Teacher in the lives of believers.

The Holy Spirit's teaching role concerns the illumination of the Scriptures for active living by faith. But what is illumination? The illuminating influences in Luke's story of the "first day of the week" following Jesus' death and burial provide insights into the Holy Spirit teaching ministry in the lives of believers. The story begins with a group of women arriving at the tomb where Jesus body had been laid to rest. They are surprised to discover the stone used to seal the entrance to the tomb rolled away. Entering the tomb, they could not find the body of Jesus. Two men "in clothes that gleamed like lightening" ask them why they are looking for the living among the dead. "He is not here; he is risen! *Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ... Then they remembered his words*" (Luke 24:6, 8 *italics added*). These two extraordinary men were instruments of understanding for these women along the lines of what Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would do for his disciples: "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the

Father will send in my name, will teach you all things *and will remind you of everything I have said to you*” (John 14:26 *italics added*). Nolland points to a similar remembering in Acts 11:16 that provided “the key to Peter’s understanding of his preceding experience ... This suggests that, with memory thus restored and with the assistance of the angelic revelation, the women are now ready to explain the empty tomb in terms of the gospel message of the resurrection.”<sup>114</sup> Just as these women were prompted by the two men at the tomb, and as a result remembered Jesus’ words, the Holy Spirit’s teaching ministry prompts believers to remember His words as recorded in the Scriptures. As the women returned from the tomb and reported all that had taken place at the tomb, those who had no encounter with the two men “in clothes that gleamed like lightening” did not believe them, because their words seemed like nonsense (Luke 24:11). Apart from the angelic revelation the others were unable to be convinced by the women’s witness. The Holy Spirit’s illuminating influence in the lives of believers helps them to recall and accept the Word of God as presented in the Scriptures.

Probably the clearest example of the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit for understanding Scripture is to be found in Luke 24:13-35. Following Jesus’ death and burial, two disciples of Jesus were making their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus—not knowing that Jesus had risen. They were about seven miles from Jerusalem when a third traveler, whom the disciples did not recognize but Luke identifies as Jesus, joined them. Their new companion engaged them in a conversation that gave them an opportunity to express their discouragement and confusion over the events that had taken place in Jerusalem during the past three days culminating with the report of the empty tomb. After

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<sup>114</sup> John Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53, Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, Vol. 35c (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1993) 1190.

hearing their stories of what had taken place in Jerusalem, Jesus rebukes them for their inability to understand “all that the prophets have spoken” (Luke 24:25). In response to their lack of understanding, Jesus, “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets,” explained the events of the previous three days. Eugene Peterson’s translation of Luke 24:27 reads: “Then he started at the beginning, with the Books of Moses, and went on through all the Prophets, pointing out everything in the Scriptures that referred to him.” Jesus, using the Old Testament Scriptures, provided an explanation or interpretation that confirmed that it had been decreed long ago that the Messiah would suffer before entering into His glory. Jesus’ explanations increased the disciples’ understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures, his identity, and their present circumstances. As they approached Emmaus the two disciples persuaded their unidentified traveling companion to enter the village and stay with them a little longer. Later, during a meal together, as Jesus took bread, gave thanks, “their eyes were opened and they recognized him” (Luke 24:31).

Jesus did for these two disciples what He promised the Counselor would do: “When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, *he will testify about me*” (John 15:26 *italics added*). Nolland attributes the opening of the disciples’ eyes with Jesus breaking “through the Satanic blinding that has kept the disciples from perceiving that it was Jesus who was with them.”<sup>115</sup> The apostle Paul confirms the possibility of satanic influence in 2 Corinthians 4: “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (v.4).

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<sup>115</sup> Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53* 1206.

Liefeld, however, makes no reference to a supernatural blinding when pointing to the verb translated “were opened” as evidence of “divine action” associated with the disciples’ ability to finally recognize Jesus.<sup>116</sup> The Holy Spirit’s arrival, as promised by Jesus, made the divine eye-opening experience accessible to all believers.

Once the disciples’ eyes were “opened” they recognized Jesus and he disappeared from their sight (Luke 24:31). The immediate response of these two disciples was to return to Jerusalem and tell the Eleven and the others with them of their experience. While they were testifying of their Emmaus-encounter Jesus himself stood among them (Luke 24:36). Following a greeting that was meant to put them at ease, Jesus proceeded to provide some convincing physical evidence that was intended to dispel their fears and doubts. He showed them his hands and his feet. He invited them to touch his flesh. He asked for food and ate it in their presence. Following the physical demonstrations Jesus turned their attention to the Hebrew Scriptures:

“Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. *Then he opened their minds so that they understood the Scriptures.*” (Luke 24:44-45 *italics added*)

Nolland accepts this reference as synonymous with the activity described earlier in verse 27.<sup>117</sup> Marshall explains that the “opening” can refer to the Scriptures or to the minds of the readers but the end result is undeniable: “Until this time the disciples’ minds had been unable to perceive the prophetic meaning of the OT, i.e. to see that certain prophecies

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<sup>116</sup> Walter L. Liefeld, *Matthew - Luke, The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1984) 1054.

<sup>117</sup> Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53* 1219.

were about the Messiah and were fulfilled in Jesus.”<sup>118</sup> Jesus not only recognized the Hebrew Scriptures as a special revelation of God but also the need for all believers to receive the Spirit’s illuminating influence so that they can understand and apply the Scriptures.

The Apostle Paul anticipated a similar influence in the lives of believers in Ephesus when he prayed “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, *so that you may know him better*. I pray also that *the eyes of your heart may be enlightened...*” (Eph. 1:17-18 *italics added*). The Spirit’s presence in the lives of the Ephesian believers would provide a dynamic comprehension of God’s person, plans, and purposes that was not attainable apart from his illuminating influence. Bloesch states a personal position and then later quotes Calvin in support of the believer’s dependence on the Spirit’s illuminating influence:

I hold that the Bible is filled with the Spirit of God, who brings new light to bear on ancient wisdom—light that leads not only to renewed understanding but also to obedience ... Calvin was adamant that the Word of God infinitely transcends the compass of human conception and imagination. “Our senses are so feeble that we could never understand a single word that God says to us, unless we are illumined by his Holy Spirit; for carnal men cannot comprehend heavenly things.”<sup>119</sup>

The Holy Spirit’s teaching ministry enables believers to increase their comprehension of the person, plans, and purposes of God as revealed in the Scriptures.

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<sup>118</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1978) 905.

<sup>119</sup> Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration & Interpretation* 20, 22.

Lewis and Demarest provide some valuable exposition on this point:

The mind of sinners, according to some, is blind, and divine illumination provides new sight. The will of sinners, according to others, is rebellious and would not accept the biblical verdict of guilt nor the gospel of grace if it could “see” it. A third view suggests that both are correct and the whole person—the thinking, feeling, and willing self—though active in relation to himself and the world, is unresponsive to the truths of special revelation. The Holy Spirit’s illuminating activity frees a person’s capacities in relation to spiritual things. Renewing the capacities to know, love, and obey God, illumination enables sinners to understand that the gospel is objectively true, to assent to its truth for themselves personally, and to commit themselves to the Savior.<sup>120</sup>

In what can be regarded as something of a parallel passage to Luke 24, Jesus referred to the promise:

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. (John 16:13-14)

The Holy Spirit’s teaching role would not only remind them of what Jesus had taught but guide them into all truth, tell them what was yet to come, and make known what he received from Christ. In John 16:12 Jesus acknowledged the disciples limited capacity to absorb all that he had to tell them but assured them that the Spirit’s arrival would allow

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<sup>120</sup> Lewis and Demarest, *Volume Three* 167.

Him to continue. MacArthur offers a noteworthy summary of this important activity entrusted to the Spirit of God:

Illumination, though often considered secondary to revelation and inspiration, is equally important. Without revelation and inspiration, we would have no Bible. Without illumination, we can have no accurate understanding of the Bible. It would be of little use to have a special revelation from God that no one could understand. So illumination is the culmination of the revelatory process.<sup>121</sup>

The Holy Spirit's illumination of the Scriptures is indispensable for reliable interpretation of Old Testament narratives. Pratt in his guide to interpreting Old Testament stories affirms the vital contribution of the Spirit to the interpretive process:

In a word, the Spirit illumines our minds so we may apprehend and appropriate Scripture (Romans 8:14-17; 1 Corinthians 2:10-16; 1 Thessalonians 1:5; 2:13; 1 John 2:27; 5:7-9). Without His enlightenment our interpretive efforts are hopeless. But illumination does not rule out the need for human study. The Holy Spirit is not a hermeneutical *Deus ex machina*, solving all our interpretive problems. He does not miraculously grant us complete insight and thus remove the need for careful investigation.<sup>122</sup>

The Apostle Paul's charge to "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth"

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<sup>121</sup> John MacArthur Jr., *Rediscovering Expository Preaching: Balancing the Science and Art of Biblical Exposition*, ed. Richard Mayhue (United States: Word Publishing, 1992) 109.

<sup>122</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 5.

(2 Tim. 2:15) was intended to complement the illuminating influence of the One who will guide believers into all truth. It's a partnership. The Spirit's illuminating influence still requires our best human efforts in the interpretive process. The Holy Spirit is the indwelling Teacher who illumines the Scriptures so that believers can understand and apply the significance of Old Testament narratives.

## THE TRUTH AS NARRATIVE

All inspired Scripture is true whatever genre the sacred authors chose to utilize. Since inspired Scripture is true in all of its instruction and so much of its text is presented in *narrative form*, we can truly say that *the truth is narrative in these instances*. Indeed, Jesus often prefaced his narratives with the phrase "I tell you the truth" (cf., Matt. 5:18, 26; 6: 2, 5, 16; 8:10; John 3:5). So how do Old Testament narratives convey their truth? The truth as narrative does not present us with a question as to whether Scripture is true. Since the historical books of the Old Testament are regarded as part of the collection of prophetic books in the Hebrew canon, they are just as prophetic as books bearing the names of the prophets. They are however, no less truth-bearing just because they are narratives. But narratives of course present us with some of the most indirect truth claims of the Bible. Not everyone reveres the scriptural narratives for what they are, just as some readers might fail to acknowledge the divine inspiration of the rest of Scripture. Readers' interpretations are also influenced by their presuppositions. Since the Old Testament is largely written in story form highlights the importance of investigating the biblical presentation of truth through narrative, narratives that tell the truth, narrated truth, and the preacher as narrator of biblical truth.



## Truth Through Narrative

The prophets tell stories as a primary means of revealing truth. Greidanus asserts that the prophets themselves “were keenly aware of the fact that the word was God’s word, and not theirs. God communicated his word to them; he put his words in their mouth (Jer. 1:9); he gave ‘their spirits access to his Word’; he inspired them.”<sup>123</sup> These Old Testament prophets went on to deliver God’s Word through narratives. They told stories to present and to preserve the historic turning points of salvation: God sparing Adam and Eve in the garden (Gen. 3); God providing Isaac to Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 21); Moses’ encounter with God and his calling at the burning bush and at Sinai (Exod. 3); Samuel accepting the role of selecting a king for Israel (1 Sam. 8); David’s sin and repentance (2 Sam. 11-12); Josiah’s discovery of the Torah (2 Kings 22); Ezra and Nehemiah’s role in leading the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the restoration of the covenant (Neh. 8). Kaiser, reflecting on the volume of narrative literature included in the Bible, concludes that “narrative is the essence of biblical revelation.”<sup>124</sup> God’s action in revelation is mirrored and “inscripturated” in narrative. God, in choosing human authors as inspired instruments to convey his words and/or actions, used stories as a foundational means of preserving the truths that he desires to communicate.

The inspired narrative of Israel’s deliverance from Egyptian bondage begins with the story of Moses’ calling. Moses was tending his father-in-law’s flocks on the “far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God” (Exod. 3:1). Kaiser explains that the qualifier attached to Horeb “was named in retrospect” because of the sacred writer’s

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<sup>123</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* 2.

<sup>124</sup> Kaiser Jr., “Narrative” 69.

perspective on the entire narrative.<sup>125</sup> The appearance of the angel of the Lord “in flames of fire from within a bush” is what initially catches Moses’ attention. Approaching the bush for a closer examination God calls to him from within the bush. At this point in the story, Moses responds and enters into dialogue with the voice coming from within the burning bush. The voice self-identifies as the God of his forefathers: “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” (3:6). Once God’s presence is announced God establishes the sacred space of that presence. The truth that Moses is being taught through the event of the divine voice and miraculous activity, and that readers and hearers learn through the narrative of Moses’ experience is explained by Kaiser: “This was to prevent him from rashly intruding into the presence of God and to teach him that God was separate and distant from mortal men (cf. 19:10-13; 2 Peter 1:18).”<sup>126</sup> God’s presence and active Word has transformed this select piece of desert into “holy ground” (3:5).

Moses’ initial response to all this new revelation was to hide his face because he was afraid to look unworthily at God. As the dialogue continues, however, Moses appears to have recovered some boldness. Indeed, following God’s disclosure of his plans and purposes for the people of Israel and the role Moses is to play in their deliverance from Egyptian oppression, Moses voiced his concern: “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (3:11). Hyatt observes this as “the first of Moses’ four protests against accepting the commission to lead Israel out of Egypt.”<sup>127</sup> God responded to each of Moses’ protests with verbal assurances of his continuing presence

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<sup>125</sup> Kaiser Jr., *Genesis - Numbers* 314.

<sup>126</sup> Kaiser Jr., *Genesis - Numbers* 315.

<sup>127</sup> J. P. Hyatt, *Exodus, The New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983) 74.

and guarantee of success: “When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain” (3:12). Another of Moses’ objections presents an ironic display of boldness in response to God’s directive to return to Egypt: “I am slow of speech and tongue” (4:10). Indeed, he wasn’t slow to speak his objections! Even though God assures him of his personal help and instruction in overcoming any deficiency in communication Moses’ final request is that God send someone else. The Lord becomes furious with Moses even as he discloses that Aaron, Moses’ brother, is already on his way to meet him and that he is to become Moses’ spokesman. The Lord explains their relationship: “He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him” (4:16). At this point in the narrative it is to be noted how the divine/human dialogue can only be communicated through narratives of dialogical interaction.

Moses and Aaron reunite, return to Egypt, and then “brought the elders of Israel together, and Aaron told them everything the Lord had said to Moses” (4:29). With the leadership “team” established, God’s “mighty hand” was about to orchestrate a series of “wonders” aimed at bringing the Egyptians into submission to the divine will for Israel. According to the Lord’s promise, in the aftermath of these miraculous events, Pharaoh would not only release the Israelites from bondage but “he will drive them out of his country” (6:1). God’s interventions, mediated by Moses (and Aaron, his spokesperson), realize Israel’s deliverance from the increasingly oppressive Egyptian bondage. God has heard the people’s cries and responds by demonstrating his power on their behalf so that Pharaoh and all Egypt urged the Israelites “to hurry and leave” their country (12:33).

Goldberg refers to this narrative as “the master story of the Exodus.”<sup>128</sup> By *master story* or what we might call, “master narrative,” Goldberg means: “the kind of core, foundational narrative that, in providing a community with its paradigmatic model for understanding the world and ... guide for acting in it simultaneously gives rise to that community’s most elementary, and often most distinctive, convictions about reality.” The truth through the Exodus narrative becomes foundational to all future understanding of salvation.

### Narratives that Tell the Truth

Narratives tell the truth in ways unique to their form. Greidanus states that, “Of all the biblical genres of literature, narrative may be described as the central, foundational, and all-encompassing genre of the Bible. The prominence of the narrative genre in the Bible is related to the Bible’s central message that God acts in history. No other genre can express that message as well as narrative.”<sup>129</sup> Although we can distinguish between historical narratives and fictional ones in Scripture (and both of them convey truth), without narrative, there is no “life” in Scripture, only teachings and devotional material. Scripture reflects its writers’ profound concern to present truthful and truth-bearing accounts of events in salvation history. In the first instance, their truthfulness points to something like reliability. Events occurred as they are told. But equally important, indeed more important to the authors of Scripture is the conveyance of the meaning of these events. Over and over the narratives of the Old Testament present the reader with something like “this means that.” Nowhere is that more evident than in the biblical stories

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<sup>128</sup> Goldberg, “God, action, and narrative: which narrative? which action? which God?” 40.

<sup>129</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* 188.

that tell truths that are painful but necessary to be told. Old Testament narratives include both complimentary and disturbing stories about God's people, individually and corporately.

Following God's deliverance of Israel from the land of Egypt and Egyptian bondage through a series of miraculous events culminating in the crossing of the Red Sea, Moses leads the Israelites into the Desert of Shur (Exod. 15:22). All Israel walks through the sea on dry ground surrounded with walls of water on their right and on their left. Once the Israelites were safe on the other side of the Red Sea, Moses responds to God's directive to stretch out his hand over the sea so that the walls of water flowed back over the pursuing Egyptians. Israel, following their miraculous deliverance, see the bodies of dead Egyptians littering the Red Sea shoreline. As they examine the evidence of the Lord's great power displayed against the Egyptians the story reports that the Israelites "feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant" (Exod. 14:31). Kaiser explains "the fear of the Lord (v.31) was the signal of a responsive attitude of submission and love equivalent to putting one's whole trust in him."<sup>130</sup> At this point the Exodus narrative is interrupted by a poetic insertion. A song of what the Israelites sang as part of their deliverance celebrations told of God's activity on their behalf. At the conclusion of the song the story continues with Moses leading Israel from the Red Sea into the Desert of Shur (Exod. 15:22).

Three days into their desert journey without finding drinkable water they arrive at Marah. Here too the water proves to be undrinkable and "so the people grumbled against Moses" (v.24) in whom they had put their trust three days earlier while celebrating on the

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<sup>130</sup> Kaiser Jr., *Genesis - Numbers* 390.

shores of the Red Sea. Moses cries out to the Lord and the Lord shows what needed to be done to make the water drinkable. Sailhamer offers the following insight:

When they followed the “instruction,” the water became sweet and their thirst was satisfied (15:25). In the Hebrew text, the word *instruction* is the verbal form of the word *Torah*, that is, (divine) instruction. The lesson is clear enough—God’s people are to “listen carefully to the voice of God” (v.26). His instruction will be sweet to them and satisfy their thirst ... though it is possible to understand verse 25 to refer to the commands of God yet to be given to Israel at Sinai, it seems more probable that at this stage in their journey we are to understand that God had made known his will to them in concrete laws. At least this appears to be the point the author wants to make.<sup>131</sup>

The story of Israel at Marah tells of God’s miraculous provision as the Israelites obey his instruction. When they moved from Marah to Elim they discovered an abundance of drinkable water. From Elim they traveled into the Desert of Sin where once again the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron saying, “If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death” (Exod. 16:2-3). The Israelites’ fears and appetites have impaired their memories of the Egyptian bondage where their misery and cries had prompted God to send Moses on a rescue mission (cf. 3:7-10). In response to their grumbling God promises to “rain down bread from heaven” (16:4). While informing the people of God’s provision Moses

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<sup>131</sup> Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* 272.

clarifies that their grumbling against him and Aaron is really “against the Lord” (16:7-8). Grumbling has become a defining characteristic of Israel’s relationship with the Lord during their wilderness wanderings. When their needs were not met they grumbled against their leadership and questioned God’s involvement and/or interest in their well-being.

Water becomes an engrossing concern as they camp at Rephidim. They quarrel with Moses: “Is the Lord among us or not?” (17:7). Kaiser concludes, “The people’s grumbling is strong evidence of the historical truthfulness of the wanderings narrative.”<sup>132</sup> The truth of Israel’s fickleness displayed in their grumblings against God-ordained leaders stood in stark contrast with the Lord’s miraculous deliverance from Egyptian bondage and faithfulness in providing for them during their wilderness wanderings.

Another narrative where meaning is as essential to narrative truth as reliable historiography is the story of David. King David rose from the obscurity of tending his father’s sheep to become one of Israel’s most infamous kings. Along the way, during his rise to power, he displayed many admirable qualities, none more popular than Samuel’s reference to young David when announcing Saul’s replacement: “the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people” (1 Sam. 13:14). Yet David’s life, as portrayed in the biblical narratives, was an excruciating mixture of faithfulness and unfaithfulness. At a time when the Lord’s anger burned against Israel, the reason for which is not mentioned, David felt compelled to take a census of Israel and Judah (2 Sam. 24). Alter notes the vision of God presented in this story:

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<sup>132</sup> Kaiser Jr., *Genesis - Numbers* 398.

The God of this story has the look of acting arbitrarily, exacting terrible human costs in order to be placated. Unlike the deity of 1 Samuel 1-2 Samuel 20, He is decidedly an interventionist God, pulling the human actor's strings, and He may well be a capricious God, here inciting David to carry out a census that will only bring grief to the people.<sup>133</sup>

Anderson references the 1 Chronicles 21 narrative where Satan or the Accuser is identified as the one “who incited David to take the census of his people. This does not lessen David's personal responsibility but, at least, Yahweh no longer appears as the instigator of evil.”<sup>134</sup> When David announced the initiative to “enroll the fighting men, so that I may know how many there are” (vs. 2) the commander of his army, Joab, voiced his reluctance. Youngblood quotes Dillard's explanation that David's transgression appeared “to be that of taking a census impugns the faithfulness of God in the keeping of His promises—a kind of walking by sight instead of by faith.”<sup>135</sup> Joab and the army commanders required no such explanation. Although the narrative remains ambiguous as to the basis for their reasoning, their opposition to David's initiative was unanimous. King David, however, overruled all objections and sent his army officials on a mission to enroll every able-bodied male in all of Israel who could handle a sword. Traveling throughout the land the census was completed in 9 months and 20 days (24:9). Upon his return “Joab reported the number of fighting men to the king” (24:9). Unlike a previous occasion, David, on this occasion became “conscious-stricken” (24:10). No external

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<sup>133</sup> Robert Alter, *The David Story* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999) 353.

<sup>134</sup> A. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, Vol. 11 (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1989) 284.

<sup>135</sup> Ronald F. Youngblood, *Deuteronomy - 1, 2 Samuel*, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992) 1096.



influences were required to uncover his wrong-doing. Narrative time creates the impression that the intrinsic forces within the king had an immediate effect. “David’s prayer for forgiveness appealed to God to deal graciously in the administration of his *justice*, leaving the means and the methods to God alone.”<sup>136</sup> The biblical narratives offer complimentary and disturbing portrayals of David, one of Israel’s most renowned leaders supporting the premise that these stories are telling the truth.

### Narrated Truth

Although modern challenges to Scripture have often focused upon factual questions of miracle and inerrancy, the narratives of Scripture have been challenged historically as well. We cannot presume to solve those problems here but to accept that there continue to be effective responses that continue to uphold the reliability of Scripture. What concerns us here, however, is that certain truths must be re-told and learned in story form or the truths of these texts becomes obscured, altered, or even violated. Thus, when discussing the biblical idea of covenant, it is completely incorrect to eliminate the particular events and unique features conveyed in Scripture where covenant and the covenant-making God are presented. Anytime God acts or accepts the faithful actions of his people as communicated in the form of a story, we have narrated truth. These stories always function to teach us what God is like; what the believer is like, thereby providing God-given examples to each generation of believers.

The account of Noah concludes with a post-Flood narrative. The narrative features the covenant-making God engaging Noah and his sons (Gen. 9) as they prepare to enter their new, post-Flood world. Once the ground has dried and the occupants of the

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<sup>136</sup> Anderson, 2 *Samuel* 285.

ark, that had been used to preserve their lives during the catastrophic, one hundred and fifty day flood, had been ordered by God to disembark: “Noah built an altar to the Lord” (Gen. 8:20). Taking some of the ceremonially clean animals and clean birds that had survived the Flood with them in the ark, Noah sacrifices them on an altar as an offering to the Lord. Hamilton points out that “this is the first reference in the Bible to an altar ... the point here is that Noah’s first act indicates his faith that God had brought him through the Flood.”<sup>137</sup> The offering was an expression of acknowledgement and appreciation for the Lord’s provision and protection at a time when “every living thing on the face of the earth outside the ark had been wiped out” (7:23). Wenham agrees that it would be “wrong to see propitiation and thanksgiving as mutually exclusive interpretations of the burnt offering. It both made atonement (Lev. 1:4) and served as an act expressing the total dedication of the worshiper to God. Both ideas are appropriate here.”<sup>138</sup>

The virtual omniscience of the narrator of the story is displayed as a revelation of God’s thoughts prompted by his pleasure in Noah’s act of worship. God, speaking to himself, promises: “never again will I curse the ground because of man ... never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done” (8:21). Noah and his sons then become the direct recipients of God’s verbal blessing (9:1). Sailhamer draws the connection between God’s covenant with Noah and the development of God’s restoration of blessing: “It lies midway between God’s original blessing of all mankind (1:28) and God’s promise to bless ‘all peoples on earth’ through Abraham (12:1-3).”<sup>139</sup> God responded to Noah’s faithful actions by blessing him and his sons.

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<sup>137</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* 307.

<sup>138</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* 189.

<sup>139</sup> Sailhamer, *Genesis - Numbers* 93.

Hamilton does not view 9:1-17 as a second conclusion to the Flood story in parallel to that of 8:20-22. The former is rather the amplification and specification of the latter.<sup>140</sup> In the first seventeen verses of Genesis chapter nine God makes four speech-acts. The “be fruitful and fill the earth” imperative reminds readers and hearers of the creation narrative in Genesis 1: “Noah is a second Adam. What God told Adam he now tells Noah.”<sup>141</sup> As Adam was commissioned by God to populate the earth so now Noah and his sons were to repopulate the post-Flood earth. But God’s speech also demonstrates some alterations that were not part of the original design. Humanity’s diet, for example, is now expanded to allow for the consumption of meat with the condition that it not have the “lifeblood” still in it (9:3). So from now on it would be permissible to slay an animal for certain purposes. Hamilton confirms the new arrangement between man and animal: “Not all the pre-Flood relationships will be restored. At least a few situations will be different, and man’s relationship to the animal world is one of them.”<sup>142</sup> The blood of a fellow human, however, is protected by God’s demand for an accounting of each man’s life because God has made man in his image (9:6). Von Rad views this oracle as the establishment of God’s exclusive and sovereign right over human life “expressed apodictically and unconditionally: It is the absolutely inviolable and, moreover, not for man’s sake because of some law of humanity, or ‘reverence for life,’ but because man is God’s possession and was created in God’s image”<sup>143</sup> Hamilton, however, raises the

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<sup>140</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* 312.

<sup>141</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* 313.

<sup>142</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* 314.

<sup>143</sup> Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks, 1956 (Bloomsbury Street, London: SCM Press Ltd., 1961) 128.

source of potential controversy in the narrative's ambiguity with respect to who is to carry out the sanctions for murder—God or another human being?<sup>144</sup>

God's second speech-act is permeated with the concept of covenant:

A covenant is meant to clarify an intricate or opaque legal situation between two groups of individuals. As a rule it concerns two unequal partners ... Here the sign of the covenant with Noah, absolutely without any confessing appropriation by the earthly partner, is high above man, between heaven and earth, ... God's gracious will is made visible to give mankind, terrified by the chaotic elements, renewed assurance that God will support this aeon and to guarantee the duration of his ordinances.<sup>145</sup>

Noah and his sons stand in complete silence as God takes the initiative to declare his promise to them, their descendants after them, and with every living creature that was on the ark with them. The covenant was "never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth" (9:11). Matthewson explains the virtue of repetition in Hebrew narratives: "it is a technique used by writers to accomplish what we accomplish today through larger font sizes, boldface type, or italics."<sup>146</sup> The storyteller does not want the reader/hearer to miss this covenant. It is critical to the understanding of this story. The same promise is repeated again in verse fifteen as part of God's explanation of "the sign of the covenant." Von Rad observes the implication of God's sign: "he also gave a sign and thus vivified his promise and guaranteed it."<sup>147</sup> Wenham sees these God-appointed "signs" resulting from his word or

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<sup>144</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* 315.

<sup>145</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* 130.

<sup>146</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 51.

<sup>147</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* 129.

consecration of sometimes ordinary events or customs that make them significant.<sup>148</sup>

Indeed, refracted light shining through vapor particles suspended in rain clouds provide a spectacular “bow” in the sky to this very day; a sign of God’s covenant with Noah.

God’s fourth and final speech-act is directed at Noah alone. The message is reiterated again: “this is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth” (9:17). Sailhamer observes God’s covenant with Noah as similar to his future covenant initiative at Sinai: “God is at work restoring his fellowship with man and bringing him back to himself.”<sup>149</sup> Hamilton, however, offers a noteworthy distinction in his conclusion to this narrative:

We note again the two subunits within vv.1-17: what man must and must not do (vv.1-7); what God will do (vv.8-17). Had this sequence been reversed and vv.1-7 followed vv. 8-17, the obligations placed on man could only have been read as covenantal stipulations. Thus the Noachian covenant’s main characteristic would have been bilaterality. This is precisely the sequence in, for example, Exod. 19 (what God has done) and Exod. 20ff. (what people must do). The present order preserves the emphasis on the unilaterality of the post-Flood situation. No “you shall” follows “I will.”<sup>150</sup>

The story of God’s initiative in establishing a covenant with Noah and his descendants conveys the divine acts communicated in the form of a story; an example of narrated truth teaching us what God is like.

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<sup>148</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* 195.

<sup>149</sup> Sailhamer, *Genesis - Numbers* 93.

<sup>150</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* 319.

In yet another narrative, a contingent of Israeli exiles returns from Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem. Under Nehemiah's leadership the rebuilding of the wall around the city of Jerusalem "was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days" (Neh. 6:15). On one occasion, after the wall has been rebuilt, the post-exilic Israelites gather in the square before the Water Gate. The gathering takes place in the seventh month. The seventh month was significant to the Israelites because according to the Law it was to be a "day of rest and sacred to the Lord" (cf. Lev. 23:24).<sup>151</sup> Williamson confers added significance by pointing out:

... according to Deut. 31:10-13, there should be every seventh year, during the Feast of Tabernacles, a proclamation of the Law, which many have seen as the basis for a covenant renewal ceremony. The emphasis both in Deuteronomy and here on the gathering of a full assembly of the people and the general similarity of the procedure and its purpose (at least as seen by the editor of Neh. 8—10 as a whole) suggests that Ezra intended this activity to comply with this law.<sup>152</sup>

The location of the people's gathering was also significant. Coming together "in the square before the Water Gate" meant that they were not gathering in the temple courts where only men were permitted.<sup>153</sup> The story tells of a congregation consisting of "men and women and all who were able to understand" (8:2). According to the story it was at the people's prompting that Ezra the priest brought out "the Book of the Law of Moses,

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<sup>151</sup> F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. R.K. Harrison (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982) 216.

<sup>152</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* 287.

<sup>153</sup> Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* 216.

which the Lord had commanded for Israel” (8:1). Williamson concedes that the crowd was identified as the initiator but there are indications that Ezra “was already prepared—waiting and anxious for the invitation when it came”<sup>154</sup> Ezra “read it aloud from daybreak till noon ... and all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law” (8:3).

The story continues with a description of some of the pragmatic details associated with the historic event. Ezra stands on a platform that raises him above the crowd and ensures that he will be seen and heard by all. The platform is large enough to accommodate a contingent of thirteen others; six men stand to his right and seven more stand on his left. We are told nothing more than their names. When Ezra opens the book of the law all the people stand, raise their hands and respond verbally: “Amen! Amen!” “Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground” (8:5-6). Fensham concludes from this description “that the congregation stood in awe and fear before God. They were supplicating.”<sup>155</sup> The Levites were entrusted to clarify and explain the content of the Book of the Law of God “so that the people could understand what was being read” (8:8). As the congregants understood and were confronted with the contents of the Book of the Law they began to weep and grieve. Williamson concludes, “That at the literary level we are to understand this weeping along the lines of remorse for failure to adequately to observe the demands of the Law.”<sup>156</sup> Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites encouraged the participants not to mourn but to view this day as a sacred day of celebration to the Lord. The people responded positively to this encouragement but the story clarifies the reason they were able to celebrate with great joy was “because they

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<sup>154</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* 297.

<sup>155</sup> Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* 217.

<sup>156</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* 291.

now understood the words that had been made known to them” (8:12). Williamson’s analysis of Nehemiah chapter eight concludes, “the dominant theme of this chapter is the declaration of the Law of God, its explication, and the people’s consequent response.”<sup>157</sup> He then narrows his focus, commenting specifically on the Israelite congregation’s response to the reading of the Book of the Law: “However we formulate our doctrine of the Word of God in detail, it is abundantly clear both from this chapter and from many others that orthodoxy in this realm is of little practical benefit if the proclamation of that Word is not met by such an attitude as is here exemplified; even the ministry of Jesus himself was frustrated on occasions by a lack of responsive faith, e.g., Mark 6:1-6; Matt 23:37.”<sup>158</sup> The biblical narratives preserve and present in written form the truth about the divine/human events from the patriarchs to the apostles.

## THE PREACHER AS NARRATOR OF BIBLICAL TRUTH

The Apostle Paul in his second, God-breathed letter to the young preacher Timothy charged him to: “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Tim. 4:2). Earie’s clarification emphasizes the content of what is to be preached: “The preacher is not to air his own opinions but to proclaim God’s eternal, authoritative Word of truth.”<sup>159</sup> Mohler puts it this way:

True preaching begins with this confession: we preach because God has spoken. That fundamental conviction is the fulcrum of the Christian faith

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<sup>157</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* 297.

<sup>158</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* 297.

<sup>159</sup> Ralph Earie, *Ephesians - Philemon, The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978) 411.



and of Christian preaching. The Creator God of the universe, the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent Lord chose of His own sovereign will to reveal Himself to us. Supreme and complete in His holiness, needing in nothing and hidden from our view, God condescended to speak to us—even to reveal Himself to us.<sup>160</sup>

The Bible's portrayals of the miraculous self-revelation of God's active presence, purposes and plans are the stuff of the preacher's message. The task of the preacher, then, as narrator of the Bible's narrated truth is to elicit an encounter between the people of our times and the written Word of God, although it was composed in other languages, at another time, and within other cultures.<sup>161</sup> House identifies how this responsibility of preachers relates to the narrative portions of Scripture: "The stories are not just entertaining or quaint tales from the past, then, nor are they a simple set of character sketches intended to inspire good deeds. Rather, they proclaim the nature and acts of the living God, *a task all effective preachers recognize as their main goal in preaching.*"<sup>162</sup> (*italics added*) Preachers fulfill this "goal of preaching" by becoming God's messengers to the church.

Preachers are God's messengers to the churches whose narratives are shaped by Scripture's narratives. In a letter to the church at Ephesus the Apostle Paul identified some specific "messengers of God" given to the church: "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and

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<sup>160</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., "A Theology of Preaching," *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, ed. Michael Duduit (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1992) 14.

<sup>161</sup> David Dockery, "Preaching and Hermeneutics," *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, ed. Michael Duduit (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1992) 142.

<sup>162</sup> Paul House, "Preaching in the Historical Books," *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, ed. Michael Duduit (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1992) 281.

teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service" (Eph. 4:11). Lincoln poses a question before exposing the significance of this revelation:

What does the exalted Christ give to the Church? He gives people, these particular people who proclaim the word and lead. In relation to vv 7, 8b, he gives not just grace to people, but he gives specific people to people ... here in Eph 4 the focus is narrowed to particular ministers of the word (as we shall see, even "pastors" cannot be completely separated from such proclamation of the word).<sup>163</sup>

The Lord gives messengers who proclaim His Word to the people of God so that they will be prepared to participate in acts of service that cooperate with his plans and purposes. Proclamations of God's Word include biblical narratives, which Robinson declares to be "sophisticated literature of great significance and splendid power."<sup>164</sup> Nowhere is that power more evident than when faith communities commit themselves to hearing and obeying the truth of the biblical narratives as proclaimed by the preachers that the Lord has given to the Church.

As we can see from the above, the truth, communicated in the form of a story, delivers a unique revelation of the power of God's Word to transform the lives of faithful hearers. Each of the four aspects explored here highlights a dimension of the unique role that narratives play in divine revelation and in the proper reading and teaching of Scripture.

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<sup>163</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians* 249.

<sup>164</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 12.

### CHAPTER III: LITERATURE REVIEW

This project aims to develop a curriculum for training preachers of the Word to discover and articulate the meaning and significance of Old Testament stories. The interpretive strategy presented in the curriculum has been guided by consulting a wide array of sources, which are reviewed below.

Long's observation, in the Preface of his work on the literary forms of the Bible, provides an excellent place to begin:

This investigation into the relationship between the literary genres in the Bible and Christian preaching has carried me deep into the territories of biblical and literary criticism, lands for which I carry no portfolio and where I can barely speak the native tongues. Experts will instantly spot me as a tourist, and I can only hope that they will tolerate my blunders while enjoying my appreciative wonder over what I have seen.<sup>165</sup>

Writers who share their experiences and discoveries “as tourists,” serve as helpful tour guides for others who wish to follow and build upon what they have “seen.” This literature review delineates the contributions of many tour guides who have provided the materials to develop the foundation for this project. In their travels, they have identified three important areas, or “points of interest,” that deserve attention: (1) Why Study Old Testament Narratives, (2) Developing a Biblically Informed Narrative Orientation, and (3) A Survey of Interpretive Strategies for Old Testament Narratives.

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<sup>165</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* 7.

## WHY STUDY OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES?

When studying Old Testament narratives we do not venture into realms “where no man has gone before.” However, according to Larsen, “a much larger revolution in culture and language,” has led to a resurgent interest in the study of biblical narratives.<sup>166</sup> He traces the development of this renewed interest to “the historical skepticism spawned by the relentless use of the critical method in biblical and theological studies.”<sup>167</sup> These critical methodologies, according to Greidanus,

... have forced biblical scholars into such a high degree of specialization that a perspective of the whole was (and still is) nonexistent. Interpreters have tended to focus on details of the text or its prehistory rather than on the text in its biblical context. This atomistic approach has led to a crisis in homiletics: biblical texts are perceived not only to be distant and objective but also irrelevant for contemporary congregations.<sup>168</sup>

Greidanus, writing almost twenty years ago, observed: “Increasingly, biblical scholars are realizing that an atomistic approach by itself cannot possibly do justice to the biblical text.”<sup>169</sup> A few years prior to the release of Greidanus’ publication Alter had already reported: “Until the mid-1970s, the only book-length study in English by a professional Bible scholar that made a sustained effort to use a literary perspective was Edwin M. Good’s *Irony in the Old Testament* .... Over the last few years, there has been growing interest in literary approaches among the younger generation of Bible

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<sup>166</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching* 16.

<sup>167</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching* 17.

<sup>168</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* 48.

<sup>169</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* 49.

scholars.”<sup>170</sup> Long acknowledges a “recent” shift that has taken place: “More and more, biblical scholars have augmented the methods of textual interpretation to include literary and rhetorical approaches, thereby expanding both the avenues of access to biblical texts and the range of possibilities for hearing the claims of those texts upon contemporary life.”<sup>171</sup> Ska observes, “At the end of the millennium narrative analysis is one of the regularly practiced methods of biblical exegesis.”<sup>172</sup> Haddon Robinson includes an assessment of the present state of narrative analysis in the “Foreword” of Mathewson’s book dealing with the preaching of Old Testament narratives:

In recent years, many literary critics, both Christian and Jewish, have also read the stories again for the first time. Instead of regarding the narratives as cadavers to be dissected and ‘demythologized,’ they began to approach them for what they were—sophisticated literature of great significance and splendid power.<sup>173</sup>

The recent interest in the study of biblical narratives as literature has produced additional reference works expounding the interpretation and exposition of the stories preserved in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Surveying the authorial purposes behind the writing of resource materials, which expound the interpretation of biblical narratives, provides some initial answers to the question: “Why study Old Testament narratives?”

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<sup>170</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 15.

<sup>171</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* 11.

<sup>172</sup> Jean Louis Ska, *“Our Fathers Have Told Us”: Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1990) vii.

<sup>173</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 12.

To gain an appreciation and understanding of the art of narrative

Alter, whose work has been referred to as a “classic”<sup>174</sup> in the study of Old Testament narrative literature, intended to provide “a guide to the intelligent reading of biblical narrative” by illuminating “the distinctive principles of the Bible’s narrative art.”<sup>175</sup> He also includes this revealing confession:

When I began this study, I hoped I might be able to throw some new light on the Bible by bringing a literary perspective to bear on it. It is an aspiration I have not relinquished, but I also discovered for myself something unanticipated in the course of minutely examining many biblical texts: that the Bible on its part has a great deal to teach anyone interested in narrative because its seemingly simple, wonderfully complex art offers splendid illustrations of the primary possibilities of narrative.<sup>176</sup>

Alter, therefore, concludes that Old Testament narratives expose students to some well-written literature. Bar-Efrat expresses a similar motivation for writing *Narrative Art in the Bible*: “to provide a guide to the biblical narrative as a literary work of art. It aims at presenting a way of reading which is based on the employment of tools and principles current in the study of literature.”<sup>177</sup> The study of biblical narratives should apply the same techniques and strategies, according to Bar-Efrat, as used with non-biblical literature. Indeed, Fokkelman, in *Reading Biblical Narratives* advocates “a creative way of reading and aims to familiarize readers with elementary but powerful insights and

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<sup>174</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching* 20.

<sup>175</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* ix.

<sup>176</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* ix.

<sup>177</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* 7.

techniques of narrative art, which have been common currency beyond the confines of biblical studies for some generations.”<sup>178</sup>

Amit’s purpose was to present a method of reading biblical narrative “progressively” by looking at the same stories from different viewpoints.<sup>179</sup> He uses the following analogy to explain his approach: “It seems to me, rather, that reading a biblical story is like observing a polished gem, and the more you examine it from various angles, the more you are captivated by the many facets of its brilliance.”<sup>180</sup>

Ska explains his motivation for writing *Our Fathers Have Told Us*:

Since beginners can easily get lost in a forest of new terms, it seemed useful to help them find a path through this frightening wilderness.

However this work is more than just a ‘glossary’ in alphabetical order of the basic terminology used by exegetes who practice narrative analysis.

We would like to introduce the beginner to the various steps of this analysis, explaining, for instance, how scholars use these concepts when they apply them to concrete cases.<sup>181</sup>

Ska’s compilation and clarification of the myriad of terms associated with the literary analysis of Old Testament narratives makes this little volume an indispensable resource for beginners.

Gunn and Fewell alternate from chapter to chapter “between discussing mechanisms of biblical narrative and reading particular texts.”<sup>182</sup> They, however,

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<sup>178</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* 8.

<sup>179</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* xi.

<sup>180</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 149.

<sup>181</sup> Ska, “*Our Fathers Have Told Us*”: *Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* v.

<sup>182</sup> David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1993) ix.

emphasize the definitive role played by readers/hearers in determining the meaning and significance of a particular text:

Unlike the others, including Sternberg, our book understands interpretation to hinge crucially upon the reader, and not just in terms of the reader's 'competence.' Meaning is not something out there in the text waiting to be discovered. Meaning is always, in the last analysis, the reader's creation, and readers, like texts, come in an infinite variety. No amount of learning to read biblical narrative 'correctly' will lead inexorably through the 'given' poetics of the text to the 'correct' interpretation.<sup>183</sup>

Pratt's explanation for writing *He Gave Us Stories* is a pragmatic one: "We became convinced that many serious problems in the church stem from a neglect of the Old Testament. With that conviction we committed ourselves to a lifetime of helping God's people understand and apply the Old Testament."<sup>184</sup> Mathewson writes as a preacher of Old Testament narratives to preachers: "my purpose is to help preachers excel at preaching Old Testament narrative texts."<sup>185</sup>

Resource materials expounding the interpretation of Old Testament narratives can also be found as segments within larger presentations focusing on the application of the literary approach to various biblical genres. Greidanus, for example, in *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* attempts to build a bridge between the results of recent biblical scholarship as they pertain to preaching and the disciplines of biblical

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<sup>183</sup> Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* xi.

<sup>184</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* xv.

<sup>185</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 14.



hermeneutics and homiletics.

Biblical studies has recently entered into a new world: it has undergone a paradigm shift from historical to literary studies so that scholarly interest today is focused not so much on history as on *genres* of biblical literature—with a concomitant shift in homiletics to *forms* of sermons.

These paradigm shifts open up exciting new possibilities for preaching but also some precarious hazards. In this book I wish to alert preachers to the possibilities as well as the hazards ... I seek to set forth a responsible, contemporary method of biblical interpretation and preaching.<sup>186</sup>

Ryken's introduction to a literary approach to the Bible begins with the premise that "an expository sermon on a biblical passage has more in common with a literary approach to the Bible than with traditional methods of biblical scholarship" and explores "what it means to approach the Bible as literature."<sup>187</sup>

Long concedes that the case for biblical preaching itself has been ably presented by others and focuses his efforts on "one underdeveloped aspect of biblical preaching: the role that literary forms such as proverb, narrative, psalm, and parable can play in the creation of sermons."<sup>188</sup> Long's study of Old Testament narratives springs from a desire to allow the original form of the biblical literature to have a more direct influence on the process of sermon preparation.

This survey of authors reveals the issues that compelled them to write about the interpretation of Old Testament narratives. Their motivations have informed this project,

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<sup>186</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* xi-xii.

<sup>187</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* 11.

<sup>188</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* 12.

which aims to answer the question “why study Old Testament narratives” and, in turn, challenge others to begin their pursuit of becoming better interpreters of these sacred texts.

#### To acknowledge the amount of narrative in the Bible

A study of Old Testament narratives also acknowledges and honours the prolific use of stories within the Scriptures. A cursory exposure to the Hebrew canon exposes the reader/hearer to the considerable contribution made by Old Testament narrative literature. Conservative estimates report that stories account for 30 to 40 percent of the literature making up the Old Testament.<sup>189</sup> Fee and Stuart confirm:

The Bible contains more of the type of literature called “narrative” than it does of any other literary type. For example, over 40 percent of the Old Testament is narrative. Since the Old Testament itself constitutes three-quarters of the bulk of the Bible, it is not surprising that the single most common type of literature in the entire Bible is narrative.<sup>190</sup>

Duvall and Hays delineate the prevalence of this biblical genre as found in the Old Testament Scriptures: “the following books all contain large chunks of narrative material: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Jonah, and Haggai. Several other books have substantial amounts of narrative interspersed in the text as well.”<sup>191</sup>

Kaiser makes the bold assertion that “*narrative is the essence of biblical*

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<sup>189</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 20.

<sup>190</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* 78.

<sup>191</sup> J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2001) 294.

*revelation*. The long narrative corpus of both testaments forms the heart of the story and message of the Bible. That makes understanding narrative essential for all interpreters of the Bible.”<sup>192</sup> Properly “handling the word of truth” (cf. 2 Tim. 2:15) demands that careful and considerable attention be reserved for this significant portion of Old Testament literature.

#### To grasp the unique qualities of narrative communication

The study of biblical stories exposes readers/listeners to a unique form of God’s special revelation. Greidanus points out, “The prominence of the narrative genre in the Bible is related to the Bible’s central message that God acts in history. No other genre can express that message as well as narrative.”<sup>193</sup> Old Testament narratives “emphasize God’s nature and revelation *in special ways* that legal or doctrinal portions of the Bible never can, by allowing us vicariously to live through events and experiences rather than simply learning about the issues involved in those events and experiences.”<sup>194</sup> The distinctiveness of Old Testament narrative literature presents students of Scripture with unique interpretive opportunities and challenges.

The study of Old Testament narratives takes advantage of humanity’s innate curiosity in the “stories” of others. Although biblical narratives qualify as a unique form of biblical literature, Walsh identifies storytelling as a familiar practice:

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<sup>192</sup> Kaiser Jr., “Narrative” 69 (italics added).

<sup>193</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* 188.

<sup>194</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* 81 (italics added).

In every culture and in every age, from childhood bedtime stories to the reminiscences of elders, we capture our world in words and distill it in story. Storytelling—the urge to narrative—is a human universal.<sup>195</sup>

Long proposes that humanity’s curiosity is not based solely on our interest in other people’s stories but “because they have the power to suggest possibilities for our own lives ... we place each new story alongside our own narratives, allowing them to speak to each other.”<sup>196</sup> Humanity’s desire to compare stories makes McGrath’s insight into Old Testament narratives all the more interesting: “God became involved in our history. God’s story intersects with our story. We can understand our story by relating it to the story of God as we read it in Scripture.”<sup>197</sup> Studying the biblical stories as stories enables the reader/hearer to place their story alongside God’s story, “allowing them to speak to one another.” In the process of coming alongside and speaking to one another the biblical narratives can tell us about God, man (i.e. ourselves), and “the perilously momentous realm of history.”<sup>198</sup> The natural tendency to distill life into stories incites an investigative curiosity that helps the reader/hearer to “listen-up” when exposed to Old Testament narratives. In other words, these ancient stories have an inherent capacity to capture and hold our attention.

The study of Old Testament narratives recognizes the valuable contribution of stories as a revelation of God. Unlike other biblical genre, Old Testament stories do not resort to the bare facts or abstract principles to convey their truths. Rather, through the use of vivid imagery, the biblical storytellers paint pictures in the minds of

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<sup>195</sup> Walsh, *Style & Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* 1.

<sup>196</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* 73.

<sup>197</sup> McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* 169.

<sup>198</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 189.

readers/hearers so that “they have imaginary, sensory experiences of the past.”<sup>199</sup> Fee and Stuart conclude: “Narratives are precious to us because they so vividly demonstrate God’s involvement in the world and illustrate his principles and calling.”<sup>200</sup> Duvall and Hays make the bold assertion: “If we miss God in the story, then we have missed the story ... One of the central purposes of this material is to reveal God to us.”<sup>201</sup> McGrath, however, values the narrative character of Scripture for the way in which it conveys the tension between limited knowledge on the part of human characters within the story, and the omniscience of God. As readers see (or “experience”) the story from God’s point of view they begin to appreciate the interplay between the limited understanding of the characters within the story and reality, as seen from God’s point of view.<sup>202</sup>

Deuel warns against reserving these Old Testament stories solely for use as illustrations for New Testament teachings, claiming that such a practice:

... results in ignoring much Old Testament instruction that may serve as background for New Testament theology, or else as teaching not repeated in the New Testament. Creation, law, and covenant are in the Old Testament narrative which, if ignored or used for illustrations only, will create many problems of biblical imbalance.<sup>203</sup>

Instead, Pratt identifies specific examples from Jesus’ teaching ministry that demonstrate how these Old Testament narratives can be used to clarify the didactic portions of Scripture (cf.; Mark 2:23-27).<sup>204</sup> A careful examination of Old Testament narratives

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<sup>199</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 169.

<sup>200</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* 93.

<sup>201</sup> Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* 310-1.

<sup>202</sup> McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* 169.

<sup>203</sup> Deuel, "Expository Preaching from Old Testament Narrative" 283.

<sup>204</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 31.

testifies to the valuable contribution stories can make to those seeking to understand the person, plans and purposes of God, as well as humanity and the world in which we live.

To balance the simplicity and complexity of Old Testament narrative

The study of Old Testament narrative literature affirms the simplicity and complexity of the biblical stories. “Bible stories often carry a surface meaning that no one can miss, combined with difficult issues that require complex interpretive skills to notice and unravel.”<sup>205</sup> Biblical narratives, in other words, are both simple and complex. The simplicity and complexity of the Old Testament stories demand attentive readers/listeners. Mathewson’s confession exposes the existence of the simple/complex continuum:

We know them [Old Testament narratives], but then again we hardly know them at all. Some of us grew up hearing these stories, and they form part of our memory bank. We listened to them at home curled up in a parent’s lap, or we saw them pasted on flannelgraph boards in Sunday school, our short legs dangling from the big chairs ... We knew these stories well, but we may not have known them at all! Because we thought of them as simple little stories, we missed how thick they were with meaning.<sup>206</sup>

The simplicity of these biblical stories makes them accessible and profitable for beginners. A downside to this inherent simplicity, however, “is our tendency to view stories as fluff ... As a result, many churches teach Bible stories to children downstairs in the basement while adults study Paul’s epistles upstairs in the auditorium.”<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* 39.

<sup>206</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 11.

<sup>207</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 22.

The complexities of biblical narratives are the result of techniques employed by the storyteller and the subject matter of the stories themselves. Sternberg removes some of the potential intimidation that “complexity” may imply:

By foolproof composition I mean that the Bible is difficult to read, easy to underread and overread and even misread, but virtually impossible, so to speak, ... to counterread. The essentials are made transparent to all comers: the story line, the world order, the value system. The old and new controversies among exegetes, spreading to every possible topic, must not blind us (as it usually does them) to the measure of agreement in this regard.<sup>208</sup>

Pratt, on the other hand, speaks to the inherent complexities of Old Testament narratives making “investigation an ongoing process. We may discover aspects of the original meaning, but there is always more to be unearthed. We may exhaust ourselves as we investigate Old Testament narratives but we will never exhaust the texts themselves.”<sup>209</sup>

Old Testament narratives tend to deal with concrete realities rather than complicated abstract theories or information.<sup>210</sup> They describe real-life dramas. Albeit those real-life dramas occurred long ago, are set in foreign countries, describe unfamiliar customs, and are communicated in a language that we do not speak. Alter insists, “the fact that the text is ancient and that its characteristic narrative procedures may differ in many respects from those of modern texts should not lead us to any condescending

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<sup>208</sup> Mier Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 50.

<sup>209</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 126.

<sup>210</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* 14.

preconception that the text is therefore bound to be crude or simple.”<sup>211</sup> And while these stories may be unusual they are not allegories or stories filled with hidden meanings. That does not mean to imply, however, that Old Testament narratives are easy to understand.<sup>212</sup>

Duvall and Hays describe the approach that should be taken: “Don’t take shortcuts! Do not assume that these Old Testament narratives are simple stories! Observe! Probe into the text like Sherlock Holmes does into a crime scene.”<sup>213</sup> The biblical authors’ selection and arrangement of the material provide clues for understanding the story’s meaning and significance.<sup>214</sup> Greidanus observes “the fact that Hebrew narratives follow other conventions than are familiar to most of us, one should not deduce that one needs to be an expert to understand these narratives, but only that awareness of the Hebrew conventions will enable a sharper, clearer understanding of them.”<sup>215</sup>

Although Alter refers to biblical narratives as “fiction,” he still views them as “instruments of fine insight into these abiding *perplexities* of man’s creaturely condition” and “worth the effort of learning to read them attentively.”<sup>216</sup> Long alludes to the advantage of the narrative form in communicating the complex realities of life:

On the one hand, they believed in the unwavering character of God’s will, the constancy of the divine promise, and were certain that God had a

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<sup>211</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 21.

<sup>212</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* 81.

<sup>213</sup> Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* 296.

<sup>214</sup> Deuel, “Expository Preaching from Old Testament Narrative” 274.

<sup>215</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* 198.

<sup>216</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 176 (italics added).



harmonious plan for creation. On the other hand, they knew that human history was actually disorderly, human freedom was random, and human beings were stubborn and resistant. Narrative became a particularly apt literary form for capturing the fullest possible range of the interplay between these opposing forces.<sup>217</sup>

The “perplexities of humanity” and the complexity of the God who has chosen to reveal his character, plans and purposes through stories<sup>218</sup> deserve and demand attentive study.

#### To ensure careful reading of Old Testament narratives

A careful examination of these Old Testament narratives reveals insights that would otherwise remain hidden. Erickson acknowledges the interpretive challenge and insists on the need for a conscientious study of narrative passages:

Attention also needs to be given to the narrative passages. While these are not so easily dealt with as the didactic passages, they often shed special light upon the issue, not so much in defining or explaining the concept, as in illustrating and thus illuminating it. Here we see the doctrinal truth in action.<sup>219</sup>

A cursory reading will fail to notice the ambiguities and subtle clues that reveal the meaning and significance of these narrative texts. Fokkelman makes the point that interpretive ease and simplicity were not the primary aims of the biblical storytellers:

A good narrator does not want to make things easy for us by sermonizing

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<sup>217</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* 67.

<sup>218</sup> Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* 311.

<sup>219</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology* 69.

himself all the time. He knows that in that case his text would be reduced to the level of didactics. He also wants to make us think, and the best way to do this is to speak indirectly and implicitly.<sup>220</sup>

According to Kaiser: "There is simply no substitute for taking the time to determine the meaning of the narrative."<sup>221</sup> Attentive study will move readers/hearers from a vague familiarity to an appreciation and understanding of the complexities that expose the author's intended meaning and significance of the biblical story.

Careful study reveals that the authorial intent in telling these stories was not to entertain the audience (although some of the stories may be entertaining) or to provide an historical record, which modern readers often assume. When describing historic events, Old Testament stories are not preoccupied with providing an accurate, detailed, moment-by-moment record of Israel's history. Pratt clarifies the evangelical position:

Evangelicals believe that what the Old Testament narratives say about historical events is true and reliable; there are no errors in God's revelation. Yet these texts present "history from a prophetic point of view." On the one hand, we must not say the Old Testament writers fabricated their stories. Biblical writers were inspired by the Spirit of truth and did not present fiction as fact. On the other hand, ideological purposes determined which events the writers chose and how they presented them. Old Testament narratives do not give us a second by second, detailed

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<sup>220</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* 149.

<sup>221</sup> Kaiser Jr., "Narrative" 86.

account of the past. They were written from a point of view, but without error or misrepresentation.<sup>222</sup>

Authors of Old Testament stories were not aware of the contemporary “history versus fiction” debate but were motivated by a desire to present their perspective of historic events.<sup>223</sup> Borden makes the unequivocal claim: “the primary purpose of the narratives was to develop a theology through story, not create a historical record.”<sup>224</sup> Ryken reflects on the story of Eve’s encounter with the serpent to produce a cautionary note: “The writer’s chief aim in this passage is to tell a story, not develop a theological argument.”<sup>225</sup> Duvall and Hays offer their opinion on why God would choose narrative literature as a means of teaching theology:

In our opinion, God chose to use the literary device known as narrative as a major way to communicate his big story to us precisely because the biblical narratives engage us in such a powerful way. They challenge us, interest us, rebuke us, puzzle us, and entertain us. They stick in our memory. They make us think and reflect. They involve us emotionally as well as intellectually. They teach us about God and his plan for his people. They teach us about all kinds of people—good ones and bad ones, faithful, obedient ones and mule-headed, disobedient ones. They teach us about life in all its complexities and ambiguities.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 95.

<sup>223</sup> Deuel, "Expository Preaching from Old Testament Narrative" 275.

<sup>224</sup> Borden, "Is there really one big idea in that story?" 71.

<sup>225</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* 13.

<sup>226</sup> Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* 295.

Old Testament stories are not primarily history lessons; rather they aim to lure students into real-life dramas that are part of Israel's history so that they run smack into God's agenda and his assessment of their lives.<sup>227</sup>

Many of Israel's religious practices and symbols described in the Old Testament prompt questions like "What does that mean?" or "Why do we do that?" The responses to these premeditated "teachable moments" were almost always story telling.<sup>228</sup> As these stories were told and retold—about God's mighty deeds, his miraculous interventions on their behalf, his faithful provision and providential care and his reward for obedience—Amit finds it reasonable to assume that the Old Testament storytellers viewed their presentations as motivational material, prompting their Israelite audience to keep their side of the covenant and remain faithful to God.<sup>229</sup> Greidanus cites Fee and Stuart to define the "theocentric purpose"<sup>230</sup> of these Old Testament narratives: "Their purpose is to show God at work in his creation and among his people. The narratives glorify him, help us to understand and appreciate him, and give us a picture of his providence and protection."<sup>231</sup> Greidanus, however, goes on to concede:

The overall theocentric purpose of historical narrative does not invalidate other purposes. One obvious purpose of the theocentric narratives is to stimulate faith in and obedience to Yahweh. That purpose is attained, however, not by holding up people as examples of faith and obedience but

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<sup>227</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 13.

<sup>228</sup> Deuel, "Expository Preaching from Old Testament Narrative" 281.

<sup>229</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 2.

<sup>230</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* 219.

<sup>231</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* 79.

by showing in the actions of the covenant God that he is worthy of our trust and obedience.<sup>232</sup>

So, although the intensity of God's presence varies from story to story,<sup>233</sup> studying the Old Testament narratives not only teaches students about God and his ways but prepares them to respond to Him appropriately.

#### To release the life-changing power of Old Testament narrative

The study of Old Testament narrative literature unleashes the inherent power of these stories to make a difference in the lives of readers and hearers. Narratives impact readers/hearers by drawing them into the story. A good story, as a rule, will create its impact in one of two ways: (1) the reader identifies with one of the characters in the story or (2) the reader is forced to make a decision about the nature of life as presented by the story.<sup>234</sup> However, biblical stories rarely conclude with moral-of-the-story type endings, and require readers to explore their implications. Fokkelman views this as a further means of drawing readers/hearers into the story by involving them in a "never ending debate between various interpretations."<sup>235</sup> The thought process involved when wrestling with the possible meanings and significance of a specific biblical story engages the student and makes the story all the more memorable.

Studying an Old Testament narrative, however, will not answer all of our questions about the story. Fee and Stuart offer a warning:

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<sup>232</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* 220.

<sup>233</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 130.

<sup>234</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* 74.

<sup>235</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* 148-49.

They [narratives] are limited in their focus, and give us only one part of the overall picture of what God is doing in history. We have to learn to be satisfied with that limited understanding, and restrain our curiosity at many points, or else we will end up trying to read between the lines so much that we end up reading into stories things that are not there, making allegories of what are in fact historical accounts.<sup>236</sup>

Alter proposes that readers/hearers enhance the potential impact of biblical stories by learning to enjoy them more fully as stories. Fokkelman also affirms the power of these stories “to speak for themselves provided there is a competent reader listening closely.”<sup>237</sup>

The power of these stories to make a difference in the lives of readers/hearers depends on the skills of the student and the amount of time and effort they are willing to invest in the study of the story. Larsen offers specific encouragement to preachers who live “in a time when the very paradigm of communication has shifted from the Age of Exposition to the Age of Show Business, from words to images, from literary substance to ephemeral sound bites, in which ‘television is the command center of the new epistemology’: The Christian communicator must seek to utilize the powerful resources of biblical narrative as never before ... As someone has well said, we should not do poorly what the Bible does so well.”<sup>238</sup> The return on the investment of time and energies demanded in the study of Old Testament narratives is worthy of a determined and intentional consideration.

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<sup>236</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* 81.

<sup>237</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* 21.

<sup>238</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching* 30-31.

## DEVELOPING A BIBLICALLY INFORMED NARRATIVE ORIENTATION

A biblically informed *narrative orientation*, as it relates to this project, is the development of an intuitive sensitivity to the distinguishing characteristics, the basic literary devices and the common rhetorical techniques employed by the authors of these Old Testament stories. There is no doubt, in Alter's mind, that "one of the chief difficulties we encounter as modern readers in perceiving the artistry of biblical narrative is precisely that we have lost most of the keys to the conventions out of which it was shaped."<sup>239</sup> Interpreters need to know what to anticipate and what not to expect as they approach these Old Testament narratives. A narrative orientation establishes a proper perspective so that modern readers/hearers can grasp the ancient story's meaning and significance as intended by the author.

Without a narrative orientation, modern readers approach these ancient stories with interpretive strategies that fail to pick up on the intrinsic signs, symbols and structures found there. Alter affirms the importance of developing a narrative orientation to "the Hebrew mode of presentation because that will help us learn where to look for its revelations of meaning, nuanced and oblique as well as emphatic and overt."<sup>240</sup>

A biblically informed narrative orientation, therefore, enables interpreters to play the Old Testament "narrative game"<sup>241</sup> according to the literary rules for Old Testament narrative literature. Insensitivity to the literary predispositions of the Old Testament storytellers increases the possibility that the intended meaning and significance of the story will be lost, or at the very least, misrepresented.

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<sup>239</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 47.

<sup>240</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 64.

<sup>241</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* 14.

### Distinguishing characteristics

A narrative orientation includes an understanding of the distinguishing characteristics of biblical narratives. Expecting Old Testament stories to follow a linear, syllogistic pattern characterizing other biblical genre “becomes an imposition rather than exposition”<sup>242</sup> when dealing with biblical narratives. Narratives “deserve and demand unique treatment.”<sup>243</sup> The combined set of conventions employed by the authors of Old Testament stories is unique to this biblical genre.<sup>244</sup> Modern narratives conform to a different set of literary norms. Modern interpreters, therefore, err when contemporary literature rather than the ancient genres are permitted to establish the rules of interpretation.<sup>245</sup> A unilateral incorporation of the conventions that influence writers of modern narratives into an interpretive strategy for Old Testament stories will give rise to misleading assumptions and, as a result, deliver inadequate interpretations.

Alter’s expressed concern for the modern interpreter’s loss of “most of the keys to the conventions” shaping Old Testament is followed by an expression of hope “that we may be able to recuperate some essential elements of ancient convention, and thus to understand biblical narrative more precisely.”<sup>246</sup> Fokkelman’s insistence that these Old Testament stories need to be read “according to their own rules and conventions, in an attitude of respect”<sup>247</sup> implies that the “rules and conventions” are accessible. Amit’s questions about the purpose of story analysis also assume that the formative literary techniques are accessible: “Is it sufficient to discover *the literary techniques* used by the

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<sup>242</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching* 21.

<sup>243</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching* 21.

<sup>244</sup> Deuel, “Expository Preaching from Old Testament Narrative” 275.

<sup>245</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991) 166.

<sup>246</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 49.

<sup>247</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* 19.



author just so that we may admire them? Or perhaps their function is to discover how *the literary techniques* contribute to the building of the story significance?<sup>248</sup>

## 1. Characters

The presentation and development of the characters within these ancient stories is a distinguishing feature of biblical narratives. Alter points out “all the indicators of nuanced individuality to which Western literary tradition has accustomed us—preeminently in the novel, but ultimately going back to the Greek epics and romances—would appear to be absent from the Bible.”<sup>249</sup> The ancient authors were far more interested in the dramatic action of the story than the development of the story’s characters.<sup>250</sup> Ska observes “the predominance of action and the lack of interest in the psychological processes of the characters” and draws the following conclusion: “characters are most of the time at the service of the plot and seldom presented for themselves.”<sup>251</sup> A narrative orientation recognizes this minimal character development as an ancient convention influencing the formation of these biblical stories. Therefore, any character details presented by the storyteller need to be considered as critical clues leading to the understanding of the story’s meaning and significance.

## 2. Spare style

The lack of detail within biblical stories is, however, not exclusive to character development. “The authors of Old Testament narratives tell their stories in a lean, spare

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<sup>248</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 127 (italics added).

<sup>249</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 114-5.

<sup>250</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 57.

<sup>251</sup> Ska, *“Our Fathers Have Told Us”: Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* 83.

style.”<sup>252</sup> Ryken makes reference to the biblical stories’ infamous reputation for “conciseness.”<sup>253</sup> Words are not lost on detailed, flowery descriptions of the physical surroundings, characters or even the events themselves. Long sees the advantage of this lack of detail as a “convention” that engages the readers/hearers by inviting them to “flesh out” the story through the use of their own imaginations.<sup>254</sup> Here again the storyteller’s plain, unembellished writing style increases the significance of all the material included in the narrative. Borden uses a detective analogy to encourage interpreters to approach these Old Testament texts with an intense attention to the details of the story.<sup>255</sup> Matthewson affirms: “The scarcity of detailed description makes it significant when it does occur.”<sup>256</sup> A biblically informed narrative orientation encourages interpreters to become engaged in the story by exercising their imagination within the boundaries established by a determined investigation of the details as presented by the storyteller.

### 3. Realism

Ryken identifies “thoroughgoing realism” as a dominant literary characteristic of biblical stories.<sup>257</sup> Kaiser describes biblical narratives as “vivid expositions of concrete realities.”<sup>258</sup> Abstractions are left to other forms of biblical literature. The narratives “vividly demonstrate” and “illustrate” God’s involvement in the world.<sup>259</sup> According to

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<sup>252</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 60.

<sup>253</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* 41.

<sup>254</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* 78.

<sup>255</sup> Borden, “Is there really one big idea in that story?” 76.

<sup>256</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 61.

<sup>257</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* 36.

<sup>258</sup> Kaiser Jr., “Narrative” 70.

<sup>259</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* 93.

Ryken, biblical narratives contain elements found in the genre of literature that literary scholars refer to as “romance”<sup>260</sup>:

These stories are both factually realistic and romantically marvelous. They bring together two impulses that the human race is always trying to join—reason and imagination, fact and mystery. The stories of the Bible nourish our need for both down-to-earth reality and the more-than-earthly. They appeal both to that part of us that is firmly planted on earth and to the part of us that soars to the heavens.<sup>261</sup>

Larsen contends that although narrative realism is sacrificed when we force the biblical world to conform to our agenda, it is nonetheless a characteristic of biblical stories.<sup>262</sup> A biblically informed narrative orientation prepares interpreters so that they approach these ancient texts with a pragmatic mindset.

#### 4. Dialogue

Biblical narratives display the ancient storytellers’ preference for dialogue. Alter acknowledges this preference in the following observation: “direct discourse is so pronounced that thought is almost invariably rendered as actual speech, that is, as quoted monologue.”<sup>263</sup> Bar-Efrat observes how the “lean, spare style” employed by Old Testament authors is also evident in their recorded dialogue: “conversations within biblical stories are highly concentrated and stylized, devoid of idle chatter, and any details that do not fulfill a clear function.”<sup>264</sup> Kaiser views dialogue as being so central in

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<sup>260</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* 38.

<sup>261</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* 39.

<sup>262</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching* 22.

<sup>263</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 67-68.

<sup>264</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* 148.

Old Testament storytelling that it “often carries the theme of the passage.” Alter also observes, “as a rule, when a narrative event in the Bible seems important, the writer will render it mainly through dialogue.”<sup>265</sup>

The contributions of the narrator, however, must not be overlooked. Only the narrator’s commentary reveals specific motives, thoughts, hidden actions and the like. The narrator, therefore, has a decisive influence in determining the meaning of the story.<sup>266</sup> A biblically informed narrative orientation prepares interpreters so that they pay close attention to the content of the interaction between the characters within the story.

## 5. The presence of God

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of biblical narratives is the “pervasive presence of God.”<sup>267</sup> Although “the intensity of God’s presence”<sup>268</sup> may vary from story to story, God remains a central character in biblical narratives. Kaiser adds: “Even when God was not directly mentioned as being one of the participants in the scene, his presence often was implied from the point of view taken by the narrator, writer, or the prophet who spoke on his behalf.”<sup>269</sup> Duvall and Hays are even more emphatic in their declaration of the importance of recognizing God’s involvement: “If we miss God in the story, then we have missed the story ... One of the central purposes of this material is to reveal God to us.”<sup>270</sup> A biblically informed narrative orientation will prepare readers to anticipate God’s involvement in the story.

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<sup>265</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 182.

<sup>266</sup> Borden, “Is there really one big idea in that story?” 73-76.

<sup>267</sup> Kaiser Jr., “Narrative” 71.

<sup>268</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 130.

<sup>269</sup> Kaiser Jr., “Narrative” 71.

<sup>270</sup> Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* 310-1.

## Literary devices

Armed with the knowledge of distinguishing characteristics of biblical narratives, the interpreter can now approach the ancient texts with realistic expectations, asking the appropriate questions. Building on these characteristics, Kaiser further assists interpreters by identifying the common “literary devices” encountered in every story:

They are scene, plot, point of view, characterization, setting, dialogue, structural levels, and stylistic or rhetorical devices. These are the aspects of form that are most significant if one is to unravel the thread of meaning from the narrative forms in the Bible.<sup>271</sup>

Long, likewise, speaks of “basic literary dynamics” that the interpreter must consider when examining biblical stories.<sup>272</sup> The main points of his presentation include the following fundamentals: narrative techniques, character development, plot designs, and other elements (word choice, location, parallel stories, and placement of the story within the larger text). Greidanus encourages interpreters to place themselves “in the position of the original hearers and become aware of the specific ancient Hebrew conventions of communication which they simply assumed ... scene, characterization, dialogue, plot, narrator, and rhetorical structures.”<sup>273</sup> Duvall and Hays define narrative literature as “a literary form characterized by sequential time action and involving plot, setting, and characters.”<sup>274</sup> Mathewson concludes that the “quest for the meaning of an Old Testament narrative text revolves around four key elements found in all stories: plot,

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<sup>271</sup> Kaiser Jr., “Narrative” 70-71.

<sup>272</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* 77.

<sup>273</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* 198.

<sup>274</sup> Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* 294.

characters, setting, and point of view.”<sup>275</sup> Ryken simplifies it even further: “The plot, characters, and the setting of a story are the means by which the storyteller communicates something about reality.”<sup>276</sup> Developing a biblically informed narrative orientation, for the purposes of this project, includes an understanding of the following “common literary devices” that influenced the Old Testament storytellers as they formed their stories: time, plot, characters, and setting.

### 1. Perception of time

The perception of time provides essential information in the quest for understanding the meaning of a biblical story.<sup>277</sup> Ska begins his study of Old Testament narratives considering the notion of time because it is “fundamental to narratives not only because they recount events that happened in time but especially because the act of narration supposes a certain time and arrangement of events in a certain temporal order.”<sup>278</sup> He clarifies the notion of time as it relates to narrative literature by making a distinction between “narrative” (or “narrated”) time and “narration” time. “Narration time” is the amount of time it takes the reader to read the story. “Narrative or narrated time” consists of “real” time within the story measured in seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years, etc.<sup>279</sup> Fokkelman adds a third type of time which he admits is not always relevant: “the actual sequence of narrated events.”<sup>280</sup>

The contrast between narrative time and narration time identifies the relative

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<sup>275</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 43.

<sup>276</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* 53.

<sup>277</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 105.

<sup>278</sup> Ska, *“Our Fathers Have Told Us”: Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* 7.

<sup>279</sup> Ska, *“Our Fathers Have Told Us”: Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* 7.

<sup>280</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* 36.

weight of the various sections of the narrative “as well as their proportions with regard to one another and the narrative as a whole, thereby disclosing the focal points of the narrative.”<sup>281</sup> “Relative weight,” according Bar-Efrat, indicates the significance of the material to the meaning of the story. Amit states it plainly: “The more important the subject matter, the longer its time of narration.”<sup>282</sup> Ska talks of the “rhythm of the narrative”<sup>283</sup> where Kaiser employs the term “pace” when referring to the passage of time within the story. The timing of the events, dialogues, and movements within the story can be sped up or slowed down. Short sentences, the omission of detail, the absence of lengthy character descriptions,<sup>284</sup> lists, standard phrases and summarizing statements compress narrative time and accelerates the pace.<sup>285</sup> Dialogue, verbatim repetition and the interjection of the narrator’s thoughts<sup>286</sup> slows the story’s pace to a crawl (retardation).<sup>287</sup> Pratt underlines the significance of the story’s pace: “Time slows down for scenes that are of special importance to the story.”<sup>288</sup> A narrative orientation will assess the implications of “narrative” and “narration” time as part of the interpretive process.

## 2. Plot analysis

A focus on action rather than character development<sup>289</sup> establishes plot analysis as an essential consideration in the interpretive process of a biblically informed narrative orientation. Matthewson advises that the interpretive process should begin with plot

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<sup>281</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* 143.

<sup>282</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 108.

<sup>283</sup> Ska, *"Our Fathers Have Told Us": Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* 7.

<sup>284</sup> Kaiser Jr., "Narrative" 72-73.

<sup>285</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 105.

<sup>286</sup> Kaiser Jr., "Narrative" 72-73.

<sup>287</sup> Ska, *"Our Fathers Have Told Us": Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* 7.

<sup>288</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 167.

<sup>289</sup> Ska, *"Our Fathers Have Told Us": Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* 17.

analysis because “Old Testament stories focus more on action than on the development of particular characters.”<sup>290</sup> The plot is the storyteller’s means of organizing the events of the story so that they capture the reader’s/hearer’s “interest and emotional involvement, while at the same time imbuing the events with meaning.”<sup>291</sup> Osborne’s structural analysis of biblical narratives employs the “development of the plot line”<sup>292</sup> as a means of examining the “design of the story.”<sup>293</sup> Duvall and Hays explain the function of the plot:

Plot is the organizing structure that ties narrative together. The sequence of events, along with the rise and fall of dramatic action, outlines the structure of the plot and moves the story forward. Plot is also the feature that ties individual episodes into a larger coherent story.<sup>294</sup>

The “main organizing principle”<sup>295</sup> of Old Testament stories is the plot.

Mathewson points out that the “limits of a story (where it begins and ends)” constitute a unit of biblical thought, which is determined primarily by analyzing the plot.<sup>296</sup> He breaks down the plot into four parts: exposition, crisis, resolution, and sometimes a conclusion. Fokkelman, however, views the plot as having a “head and tail” that determine the boundaries of the story.<sup>297</sup> Kaiser uses the terms “beginning, middle, and end”<sup>298</sup> to describe the three elements of the plot. Long uses the same terminology but clarifies the linkages between the three elements:

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<sup>290</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 44.

<sup>291</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* 93.

<sup>292</sup> Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* 168.

<sup>293</sup> Borden, “Is there really one big idea in that story?” 73.

<sup>294</sup> Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* 299.

<sup>295</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* 76.

<sup>296</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 32.

<sup>297</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* 76.

<sup>298</sup> Kaiser Jr., “Narrative” 72.



The beginning of a story always describes a situation of need that must be addressed through an action of some kind. The middle grows out of the beginning by describing what is done about this needed action. The end in turn grows out of the middle by showing what happens as a result of the action taken in the middle. At the same time, the end relates to the beginning resolving its situation of need.<sup>299</sup>

Amit defines the “beginning” stage of the plot as providing the “primary information and basic background materials”<sup>300</sup> to enable the reader/hearer to enter the world of the story. The “primary information” includes the setting (e.g. time and place), the main characters, and the introduction of a problem to be resolved. Kaiser makes the point that biblical narratives “prefer the single plot, for they exhibit the classic pyramid pattern. From a peaceful initial situation the action rises towards the climax where the decisive step determining the outcome of the conflict is taken, and from there it drops again to a more or less tranquil situation in the end.”<sup>301</sup> Amit opens the door to other possibilities that can be investigated:

A close look at the plots of the biblical stories reveals that, as well as the classical pediment structure we have just observed, there are other methods of analysis that can contribute to the understanding of narrative plots and their implications—for example, the method that studies the scenic structuring of biblical narrative. This is a way of examining the unfolding of the plot, first in terms of the transitions of time, place, and

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<sup>299</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* 71.

<sup>300</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 33.

<sup>301</sup> Kaiser Jr., “Narrative” 72.

character, and also in terms of distinguishing between ‘telling’ and ‘showing.’ The ‘telling’ has the character of a report. The narrator describes what is happening and does not let the personae speak for themselves ... By contrast, a unit of ‘showing’ is more like a dramatic scene—it is the most direct presentation possible, with hardly any intervention by the narrator.<sup>302</sup>

Balancing the “possibilities” of plot analysis with the “keep it simple” principle will help interpreters from becoming overwhelmed or frustrated with this literary device.

The transition points between the “main elements or stages of the plot” are not always as obvious as interpreters would like. Mathewson likens it to the shift from first to second gear in an automatic transmission.<sup>303</sup> The important part, however, is not determining the exact point of transition but the beginning and end of the story. Ska endorses a more relaxed approach to the identification of the “stages” of plot development: “These “moments of the plot” do not correspond exactly to well delimited sections of the narrative text. They are rather the principal articulations of the dramatic action.”<sup>304</sup> Long, while admitting that the development of plots “are intricate and complex,” offers the following questions as a simplified means of exploring the three basic components of the story’s plot: “What is the need established in the beginning? How does the end address this need? What is the path—the middle—by which the narrative moves from beginning to end?”<sup>305</sup> Ryken acknowledges that “most literary critics and biblical expositors gravitate to plot as the basic framework for organizing a

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<sup>302</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 49.

<sup>303</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 44.

<sup>304</sup> Ska, *“Our Fathers Have Told Us”: Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* 18.

<sup>305</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* 80.

discussion of a story” but then goes on to warn that “it requires more literary education to acquire the tools of plot analysis than it does to interact with the characters in a story.”<sup>306</sup>

Osborne affirms that plot analysis delivers the “best indicator” for determining the meaning and significance of a story.<sup>307</sup> A biblically informed narrative orientation, therefore, requires a “literary education” so that plot analysis can be incorporated into the interpretive process.

After acknowledging the longstanding debate among literary critics concerning the primary importance of characters versus plot, Pratt concludes, “both characters and plot are crucial.”<sup>308</sup> Although Mathewson concludes plot is primary:

... the people involved supply the reason for our interest in stories. A rabbinic saying quips, ‘God made people because he loves stories.’ Perhaps the reverse is also true—God made stories because he loves people. Our interest in stories rivets us to the characters. We even identify stories by character’s names: the story of Ruth, the David story, and the Judah-Tamar story.<sup>309</sup>

Ryken offers a resolution to the debate by observing a “creative tension” that exists between these two ingredients of a story: “Some stories are more thoroughly plot stories, others more thoroughly character stories, but stories are finally an interaction between plot and character. Characters produce action. Conversely, characters are known to us mainly through their actions, that is, through the plot.”<sup>310</sup> Characters and plot are

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<sup>306</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* 71.

<sup>307</sup> Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* 159.

<sup>308</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 129.

<sup>309</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 57.

<sup>310</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* 71.

equally indispensable “ingredients” of Old Testament narrative literature. Osborne makes the success of a story dependant on the storyteller’s skill in “developing interesting, real people with whom the readers can identify.”<sup>311</sup>

### 3. Characters

In biblical narratives, where human characters are often found occupying center stage, Greidanus proposes that anthropocentric preaching can be avoided by remembering that the characters of the story are not there for their own sake but as a revelation of “what God is doing for, with, and through them.”<sup>312</sup> Deuel expresses a similar concern and instructs readers/hearers to “focus on the entire message to its original audience” rather than becoming attached to a specific character within the story.<sup>313</sup> Pratt, however, explains, “Old Testament authors did not present characters simply to tell their readers about people in the past but to evoke responses ... characters were designed to elicit three main types of reactions: sympathetic, antipathetic, and mixed.”<sup>314</sup> Attempts to interpret these stories must include a consideration of how the individual characters are presented and the contributions they make to an understanding of the meaning and significance of the story.

The detail that the narrator provides about specific characters is called “characterization.” The narrator can provide these details “directly” or “indirectly.” Direct characterization is provided by the narrator or from one of the characters in the story describing another character; indirect characterization is revealed by the character’s

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<sup>311</sup> Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* 159.

<sup>312</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* 216.

<sup>313</sup> Deuel, “Expository Preaching from Old Testament Narrative” 283.

<sup>314</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 147.

own actions, reactions, and dialogue.<sup>315</sup> Greidanus points out that characterization within the biblical narratives is accomplished not so much with descriptions (direct characterization) as through the character's words and actions (indirect characterization).<sup>316</sup> Ska notes another form of indirect characterization occurs when characters are named.<sup>317</sup> Long concludes that the biblical authors preferred the indirect approach that developed characters through dialogue.<sup>318</sup> He also cites Adel Berlin's observation:

... the biblical writers avoid describing physical appearance or emotional state in favor of using terse labels—"rich," "old," "wise," "lame," "strong." Each descriptive term, Berlin notes, seems to be selected "not to enable the reader to visualize the character, but to enable him to situate the character in terms of his place in society, his own particular situation, and his outstanding traits--in other words, to tell what kind of person he is."<sup>319</sup>

One approach to character classification is based on the amount of information the narrator provides about the characters' personalities. "Round characters" with many traits are complex, and therefore less predictable, but more real. Characters portraying a single personality trait are said to be "flat characters." An "agent" has no personality at all.<sup>320</sup>

The Old Testament writers provided only enough information about the characters in the

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<sup>315</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 74.

<sup>316</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* 268.

<sup>317</sup> Ska, *"Our Fathers Have Told Us": Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* 88.

<sup>318</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* 79.

<sup>319</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* 79.

<sup>320</sup> Kaiser Jr., "Narrative" 74.

story to suit their purposes,<sup>321</sup> so the fuller the exposure, the more significant the character is to that particular story.<sup>322</sup>

A second approach to character classification focuses on the roles characters play in the story. “Protagonists” are central characters that are indispensable to the plot of the story. “Antagonists” are those individuals and forces resisting and preventing the protagonist from accomplishing his or her desired outcomes.<sup>323</sup> “Agents” have very little presence and serve to move the plot forward. This type of classification of characters identifies the role “the particular character is playing in a particular story.”<sup>324</sup> Pratt explains that not all stories include characters from each of the three classifications but all characters fall into one of the three categories. Pratt replaces “agents” with a more descriptive designation, “ambivalent,” to label for the third category of characters within a story.<sup>325</sup>

When taking an “inventory of the characters”<sup>326</sup> in a story the interpreter must be sure to include God and the narrator. Duvall and Hays declare God to be a central character of Old Testament narrative literature: “He is a major player in the story ... If we miss God in the story, then we have missed the story. ... One of the central purposes of this material is to reveal God to us.”<sup>327</sup> The narrator, on the other hand, is “an unnamed, abstract figure who mediates between us and the story.”<sup>328</sup> Ska distinguishes the narrator from the writer: “The narrator is always present in the narrative as part of its structure

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<sup>321</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 134.

<sup>322</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 145.

<sup>323</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 58.

<sup>324</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 58.

<sup>325</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 143.

<sup>326</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* 105.

<sup>327</sup> Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* 310.

<sup>328</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 94.

even after the author's death because he is the "voice" that tells the story."<sup>329</sup> Although the Hebrew narrator is "drastically selective"<sup>330</sup> he knows everything there is to know about the world of the story including the feelings and thoughts of God.<sup>331</sup> Biblical narrators, in general, are "both in the background and omniscient."<sup>332</sup> Ska concludes that the narrator is "almost like God: he knows everything and speaks with an unabashed authority. This "privilege" is felt especially when he reveals the thoughts of the characters."<sup>333</sup> Amit assures readers/hearers "that God and the narrator are always to be believed, whereas the speech of the characters in the story, even if they are God's emissaries, must be checked."<sup>334</sup> A biblically informed narrative orientation will appreciate and, as a result, investigate the significant contribution made by the characters of the story.

#### 4. Setting

The setting or the context of a story aids interpretive efforts by eliminating some of the potential meanings. Pratt employs an illustration to clarify the "eliminating" influence that the setting or context may have on the meaning of a story:

John was walking downtown one afternoon when he saw a small piece of paper blowing down the sidewalk. He picked it up and read, "GET HELP!" John was a competent reader of English; he had a basic understanding of what "get" and "help" mean. At first, John thought he

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<sup>329</sup> Ska, *"Our Fathers Have Told Us": Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* 44.

<sup>330</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 126.

<sup>331</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 95.

<sup>332</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* 77.

<sup>333</sup> Ska, *"Our Fathers Have Told Us": Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* 44.

<sup>334</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 101.

knew what the note meant. But two strangers suddenly came up to him. The first one pointed at a passing car and said, "I saw where that note came from. A little boy dropped it as he was pulled into that car. You'd better call the police." But the second person interrupted. "Don't listen to him," she insisted. "I wrote the note for a friend and dropped it by accident. My friend is sick, and I want him to get some help." Now John was completely confused. Was the note a call for help or friendly advice? John could not be certain, so he wadded the note in his hands and threw it back onto the sidewalk. "I don't know what to do," he exclaimed angrily. "This note can mean many things."<sup>335</sup>

The context or setting of a story can clarify its meaning and significance. Duvall and Hays explain,

The stories of the Bible do not occur against a blank backdrop, nor are they presented against a mythical or imaginary backdrop. The settings of Old Testament are concrete places and scenes: in Pharaoh's magnificent court in Egypt, in the desert of Sinai, inside a cave, on a trail in the mountains, or on the threshing floor in the dark. The setting is important. The events of the narrative take place against a backdrop, and the backdrop affects how we understand the story.<sup>336</sup>

Ryken views the setting of the story "as much more complex, more interesting, and more important to the meaning of the story than is often realized." Setting involves

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<sup>335</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 110.

<sup>336</sup> Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* 299.



both the story's literary setting, as well as the historical, cultural and geographic setting.<sup>337</sup> The literary setting involves both an immediate or micro context and the larger or macro context. The larger context refers to the entire book in which the story is found. Contextual information related to the overall theme of biblical books can be found in many study Bibles and Bible dictionaries. Reading and summarizing the stories preceding and following the one being considered can determine the immediate or micro context of the story. Chisholm makes the point: "Just as one cannot assess the significance of a scene in a movie apart from the film's overall plot and message, so one must attempt to understand how each individual narrative in a biblical book or complex of books (e.g. Joshua - Kings) contributes to and is impacted by its larger context."<sup>338</sup> Duvall and Hays present the following practical "guidelines" for establishing the proper context of a particular story:

- Be aware of the overall story of the Old Testament. Explore how the character or episode that you are studying fits into the big picture.
- Study the overall themes and message of the Book of the Bible that your episode is in. Read a summary statement of the book in a good Bible dictionary. If possible read the entire book yourself. Look for connections between the episode you are studying and the rest of the book. What role does your episode play in the overall plot of the book?
- We recommend that you read the entire larger episode. For example, if you are studying an event in Abraham's life, then read all of the

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<sup>337</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 67.

<sup>338</sup> Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 06/02/26 1998) 168.

Abraham narrative (Gen. 12-25). Try to determine how the event you are studying fits into the larger episode. Remember to read carefully and look for connections.

- As a minimum, read three chapters: the entire chapter in which your episode occurs, the chapter that precedes it, and the chapter that follows it.<sup>339</sup>

The meaning and significance of a story will “fit” with the theme and purpose of the larger literary context in which it is set. The historic, cultural and geographic context sets the stage on which these stories are played out. Pratt proposes the following list of questions for investigating the historical, cultural and geographic setting of a story: “Where did the story take place? What was the author’s purpose in writing this book? When did the story take place? How might the original audience have responded to this story?” A biblically informed narrative orientation prompts readers/hearers to consider the setting and the context of the Old Testament story as part of the interpretive process.

### Rhetorical techniques

Point of view, repetition and irony represent three common “literary techniques”<sup>340</sup> or “rhetorical devices”<sup>341</sup> used by Old Testament storytellers in the formation of their stories. A biblically informed narrative orientation understands these techniques and devices as the ancient author’s means of communicating the significance and meaning of the story. Kaiser would include these three techniques of the Old

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<sup>339</sup> Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* 307-8.

<sup>340</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 127.

<sup>341</sup> Kaiser Jr., “Narrative” 77.

Testament stories in a “package of literary devices ... that are most significant if one is to unravel the thread of meaning from the narrative forms in the Bible.”<sup>342</sup> Pratt prefers to view them as providing clues to the author’s “intentions.”<sup>343</sup>

### 1. Point of view

Point of view addresses the perspective from which the story is being told. Long explains: “Narrators control the readers’ point of view not only by setting the mood of the story but also by pointing the narrative camera in a specific direction, thereby giving the readers a certain angle of vision.”<sup>344</sup> From whose set of eyes is the reader seeing the events unfold? In a film, the questions would be: “Where is the eye of the camera?” and “From where does the camera film the scene?” The point of view or perspective may also be referred to as “focalization.”<sup>345</sup> Ska identifies three possible points of view:

The *external point of view* positions the reader outside the story. The narrator makes readers the observers of the event. The *internal point of view* positions the reader inside the story. Readers accompany the character so that we see, hear, and feel what the character perceives. The *view from behind* takes place when the narrator reveals the inner thoughts and motivations of the characters in the story.<sup>346</sup>

Mathewson summarizes this literary technique: “The narrator’s point of view is the perspective through which we observe and evaluate everything connected with the

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<sup>342</sup> Kaiser Jr., “Narrative” 70-71.

<sup>343</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 245.

<sup>344</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* 79.

<sup>345</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 73.

<sup>346</sup> Ska, *“Our Fathers Have Told Us”: Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* 66.

story.”<sup>347</sup> In order to expand their understanding of the story the reader/hearer needs to keep asking, “Whose perspective am I actually being given?”<sup>348</sup> Osborne explains that point of view not only guides the reader to the significance of the story but also determines the actual “shape” of the narrative.<sup>349</sup> Ska adds a cautionary note to the “perspective” discussion:

Analysis which deals with the Bible should avoid certain excesses. On the one hand, the determination of perspective should not be treated simply as a matter of classification. The writers choose, in general, an over-arching perspective which commands the narrative and use it with flexibility in accordance with their purposes, conventions of their time, and the content of different scenes. On the other hand, this analysis should make the text more understandable. If it produces the opposite effect as, for instance, when it atomizes the text into very short segments using various “perspectives”, there is something wrong with either the theory or in its application.<sup>350</sup>

Ryken reminds us that there is more than one way to tell a story and it is the storyteller who controls what we see and don’t see, how we see it and when we see it.<sup>351</sup> Fokkelman refers to the author as a puppeteer who “manipulates” his audience.<sup>352</sup> A biblically informed narrative orientation observes the perspective from which story is told and recognizes that this provides important clues about the author’s message.

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<sup>347</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 71.

<sup>348</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* 139.

<sup>349</sup> Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* 156.

<sup>350</sup> Ska, *“Our Fathers Have Told Us”: Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* 67.

<sup>351</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* 85.

<sup>352</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* 123.

## 2. Repetition

A second literary technique or rhetorical device common to Hebrew narratives is repetition. Biblical authors used this technique systematically and deliberately. The modern reader needs to understand that these biblical writers received extensive training in exploiting as many forms of repetition as possible in the interests of effective communication.<sup>353</sup> Repetition in Old Testament stories was used to accomplish what we accomplish today by using bold or italic font styles, capitalization and highlighting. Through repetition the readers/hearers' attention is drawn to the repeated material. It's like the ancient authors are whispering in the ears of readers/hearers saying: "Don't miss this!" or "This is important!" Alter, however, identifies repetition as one of the most imposing barriers standing between the modern reader and an understanding of the text: "This habit of constantly restating material is bound to give us trouble, especially in a narrative that otherwise adheres so evidently to the strictest economy of means."<sup>354</sup> Types of repetition found in the Hebrew Bible involve key words (Leitwort), motif, theme, sequence of actions and type scenes.<sup>355</sup> Fokkelman observes that while prevalent, the Old Testament writers manage to avoid the monotonous use of straight repetition by developing "a sophisticated technique of varied repetition, with the primary purpose of expanding the richness of meanings and keeping all sorts of surprises in store."<sup>356</sup> Ryken suggests that this literary technique provides "the best clue to what a story is about."<sup>357</sup> Kaiser agrees: "Repetitions are a most valuable part of the biblical text and are not to be

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<sup>353</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* 112.

<sup>354</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 79.

<sup>355</sup> Kaiser Jr., "Narrative" 77.

<sup>356</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* 112.

<sup>357</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* 83.

seen as marks of sloppiness by the scribes or as an opportunity for excision of the material by modern critical scholars. Instead, they help direct our attention to things in the text that we might otherwise have overlooked.”<sup>358</sup> Greidanus offers an additional explanation: “With the narration of events which take place simultaneously, the technique of resumptive repetition serves to return the audience to the original point of the story after it has followed a branch for a while.”<sup>359</sup> A narrative orientation prepares readers/hearers to accept the use of repetition as a literary technique used intentionally by the ancient storytellers to communicate meaning and significance.

### 3. Irony

The final common literary technique or rhetorical device identified for the purposes of this project is irony. Matthewson defines irony as “an incongruity or discrepancy.” He sees two types of irony found in Old Testament stories: 1) “verbal irony” occurs when a character says one thing and intends another, often the opposite of what a literal meaning would infer, and 2) “dramatic irony” occurs when a character says one thing but does not perceive what the reader, having additional information, already knows to be either true or false.<sup>360</sup> Uriah provides a biblical example of this second type of irony. As far as the reader is told in the text, Uriah was unaware that his reasoning for refusing to return to his home was delivering a stinging rebuke to the king of Israel (cf., 2 Sam. 11:11). Pratt considers dramatic irony as the primary interest of Old Testament writers, occurring “both explicitly and implicitly,” to disclose their ideological

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<sup>358</sup> Kaiser Jr., “Narrative” 78.

<sup>359</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* 209.

<sup>360</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 75.

outlooks.<sup>361</sup> Bar-Efrat explains that biblical narrative plots can create ironic situations in which “the character knows less than the reader, or unknowingly does things which are not in his or her best interest, or from the course of events leading to results which are the reverse of the character’s aspirations.”<sup>362</sup> Duvall and Hays explain why the Old Testament authors would resort to using this particular literary technique:

Irony is the literary term used to describe situations where the literal or surface meaning of an event or episode is quite different—indeed, sometimes the opposite—of the narrator’s real intended meaning. This is not done to hide the meaning from the reader but to present the meaning with more force. It allows the narrator to sneak up on the readers and to surprise them with the unexpected. Occasionally it also provides some humor ... The authors of Old Testament narrative love to use this technique, and their frequent use of irony enhances their stories, making them fascinating to study and enjoyable to read.<sup>363</sup>

This is not intended to be a comprehensive identification of all the literary techniques or rhetorical devices employed by the authors of these ancient stories. A narrative orientation, however, that has considered point of view, repetition, and irony as the more common means used by the Old Testament storytellers in their attempts to communicate effectively, is better equipped to discover the meaning and significance of the story.

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<sup>361</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 247.

<sup>362</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* 125.

<sup>363</sup> Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* 305.

A narrative orientation developed for the purpose of aiding readers/hearers in approaching Old Testament stories begins with a commitment to discover the original author's intentions. Ska provides a clarification: "All these categories are indicators of the way to proceed when one enters into a narrative. They are never pigeon-holes to arrange neatly and permanently the texts ... they are rather a compass and maps that a traveler uses for a journey through the Biblical narratives."<sup>364</sup> The destination of the "journey" into the text is the discovery of the meaning and significance intended by the original author.

Being able to distinguish what is explicitly taught can be fairly easy.  
Being able to distinguish what is implicitly taught can be difficult. It requires skill, hard work, caution, and prayerful respect for the Holy Spirit's care in inspiring the text. After all, you want to read things *out of* the narrative, rather than *into* it.<sup>365</sup>

Pratt, at the beginning of his guide to interpreting Old Testament stories, emphasizes the need to balance hermeneutical skill with hermeneutical power:

Our hermeneutical tools are the vast array of human knowledge and skills we bring to interpretation. Hermeneutical power is the work of our divine Teacher, the Holy Spirit. Sadly, we often forget that we need both human tools and divine power to interpret Old Testament stories. Instead we rely too much on one or the other.<sup>366</sup>

A narrative orientation to Old Testament will include a conscious dependence on the

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<sup>364</sup> Ska, *"Our Fathers Have Told Us": Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* 94.

<sup>365</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* 87.

<sup>366</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 3.



Holy Spirit's enlightening influence (i.e., "illumination" of the Scriptures).

Finally, and possibly most importantly, a narrative orientation values and respects the biblical stories as stories. In other words, the truth is not *in* the story but the truth *is* the story. Alter affirms, "the paradoxical truth of the matter may well be that by learning to enjoy the biblical stories more fully as stories, we shall also come to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, man, and the perilously momentous realm of history."<sup>367</sup> Ryken speaking about the types of writings in the Bible states:

... expository writing gives us the precept, literature incarnates the precept in an example—an example that does not simply illustrate the truth but is itself the meaning. A work of literature is incarnational—it embodies meaning. The customary literary terminology for talking about this is to say that the writer of literature shows rather than tells.<sup>368</sup>

The truths of the Old Testament narratives need to be retold again and again and again by retelling the story.

## INTERPRETIVE STRATEGIES FOR OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

The various elements of an interpretive process used to determine the meaning and significance of Old Testament narrative literature have been well documented. The increasing interest in adopting a literary approach to these ancient texts, however, promises to deliver an abundance of additional information to consider in the future. Amit is convinced that "the attempt to elicit the explicit or implicit significance of a story by studying its various components, tying up as many of them as possible in a logical

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<sup>367</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 189.

<sup>368</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* 13.

way, and paying close attention to its nuances and subtleties, can direct the interpreter to the plain interpretations”<sup>369</sup>

The resource material that provided the formative information for this project prepares readers/hearers to approach these Old Testament stories with a narrative orientation. A narrative orientation designed and developed with Old Testament stories in mind enables interpreters’ to approach the biblical story with realistic expectations and ask the right questions of the material being investigated. Most of the resource material reviewed for this project simply introduced the interpreter to the unique considerations needed to approach Old Testament narratives. They handed interpreters the pieces of the puzzle and a picture of what the finished product was suppose to look like, and set them free to examine the ancient stories on their own. Some of the resource material, however, took a more definitive step. Treating Old Testament narratives more like Borden’s “crime scene” these authors provided a procedural outline explaining how one might deal with the many “clues” that can help the investigator solve the “mystery” of the story. A survey of these interpretive processes is informative.

Larsen, concurring with Hans Frei’s appeal to resist “abstraction and rather tell and retell the story” likewise endorses Alan M. Stibbs’ guidelines as a “general technique of responsible interpretation.”<sup>370</sup> Those guidelines are as follows:

1. Get the true meaning of the single words.
2. Get at the use, syntax and idiom of the original language (with help of commentary and concordance if your facility in the original is limited).
3. Get at the form of expression: literal, figurative, actual, metaphorical.

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<sup>369</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 129.

<sup>370</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching* 84.

4. Get at the character of the composition [what we have called genre recognition].
5. Aim to appreciate the allusions, figures and expressions.
6. Recognize literary customs, such as Hebrew parallelism in poetry.
7. Do not be misled by chapter or other divisions.
8. Seek to understand the particular significance of each passage.
9. Beware of introducing conceptions foreign to the original text.
10. Recognize the character of divine revelation as given in and through history, i.e., the original, literal historical meaning of Scripture is of fundamental importance.<sup>371</sup>

Fee and Stuart do not present a specific step-by-step interpretive process but they do provide a list of “ten principles” that are intended to help interpreters to avoid “obvious errors” during the interpretive process:

1. An Old Testament narrative usually does not directly teach a doctrine.
2. An Old Testament narrative usually illustrates a doctrine or doctrines taught propositionally elsewhere.
3. Narratives record what happened—not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time. Therefore, not every narrative has an individual identifiable moral of the story.
4. What people do in narratives is not necessarily a good example for us. Frequently, it is just the opposite.
5. Most of the characters in Old Testament narratives are far from perfect

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<sup>371</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching* 84.

and their actions are, too.

6. We are not always told at the end of a narrative whether what happened was good or bad. We are expected to be able to judge that on the basis of what God has taught us directly and categorically elsewhere in the Scripture.
7. All narratives are selective and incomplete. Not all the relevant details are always given (cf. John 21:25). What does appear in the narrative is everything that the inspired author thought important for us to know.
8. Narratives are not written to answer all our theological questions. They have particular, specific limited purposes and deal with certain issues, leaving others to be dealt with elsewhere, in other ways.
9. Narratives may teach either explicitly (by clearly stating something) or implicitly (by implying something without actually stating it).
10. In the final analysis, God is the hero of all biblical narratives.<sup>372</sup>

Kaiser prefaces his guidelines for interpreting biblical narratives with a disclaimer: “The principles for interpreting narrative texts are constantly being updated and revised.” He then proceeds to advise the interpreters to “master” the following “Guidelines for Interpretation”:

1. Identify each scene of the narrative.
2. Analyze the plot of the narrative.
3. Determine the point of view from which the narrative is recorded.
4. Pay close attention to the details of the scene.

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<sup>372</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* 83.

5. Examine the dialogue that the author uses to narrate the story.
6. Look at the units within a scene and their relationship to one another.
7. Study the stylistic devices the author used.<sup>373</sup>

Osborne's interpretive strategy provides a balance to narrative criticism:

Narrative criticism, as we have seen, has a rightful place in the pantheon of critical methodologies within the hermeneutical temple. The various factors that produce meaning in a story and that draw a reader into the narrative world within that story are clearly elucidated in this discipline. Furthermore, they have proven themselves to be valuable components of a close reading of a text; in short, they work! Yet if cut off from historical and referential meaning, they become arbitrary and subjective. Therefore, any proper methodology must blend the two (literary and historical) in such a way that they modify one another, magnifying the strengths and avoiding the weaknesses of each.<sup>374</sup>

Osborne proceeds to tailor a general interpretive strategy for use with biblical narratives by incorporating literary elements within the hermeneutical process:

1. Structural Analysis. This stage determines the structural development of plot line.
2. Stylistic Analysis. The exegete must identify the various literary devices used to present the material, then see how those techniques

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<sup>373</sup> Kaiser Jr., "Narrative" 80-81.

<sup>374</sup> Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* 168.

deepen the plot structure and highlight certain aspects within the narrative.

3. Redactional Analysis. At both the narrative and the theological levels redaction techniques provide a control against subjective interpretation.
4. Exegetical Analysis. Many narrative studies have neglected serious exegesis, and the results have been less than satisfactory.
5. Theological Analysis. The scholar must separate the detailed emphases within a single passage from the major theological threads that link them to the major section and the book as a whole. These will yield the major and minor points of the passage.
6. Contextualization. This step is the core of biblical narrative, which asks the reader to apply the lessons to one's own situation.
7. Use a Narrative Form for the Sermon. Instead of a 'three-point' sermon constructed logically around the main points of the text, this form of sermon follows the contours of the biblical story itself, retelling the drama and helping the congregation to relive the drama and tension of the unfolding story.<sup>375</sup>

Matthewson's interpretive strategy is developed around four major features that need to be examined when studying an Old Testament story:

1. Plot

Interpreters who can use Hebrew start here ...

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<sup>375</sup> Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* 168-72.

- a) Plot Lines: Locate the main storyline (foreground) and subsidiary lines (background).
- b) Marked Text: Spot sections where clusters of rare forms and terms slow down the reader.
- c) Chiasm: Note chiastic patterns (a b c c' b' a'), which mark boundaries or turning points.

Interpreters who do not use Hebrew start here ...

- a) Plot stages: Determine the story's exposition, crisis, resolution and conclusion.
- b) Archetypes: Identify plot patterns or motifs (comedy, tragedy, petitionary narratives, etc.)
- c) Repetition: Notice key words, changes or duplication in command fulfillment, and unnecessary repetition of names and pronouns.
- d) Timing and Pace: Compare narrative time (length of events) to narration time (length of telling).

## 2. Characters

- a) Classifications: Identify characters as major (protagonist, antagonist, foil) or minor.
- b) Direct Descriptions: Look for the occasional statement about a character's appearance.
- c) Behavior: Observe the character's actions for insight into their personalities and nature.

- d) Names: Notice the significance behind the names of characters.
- e) Designation: Pay attention to how the narrator or other characters describe a character.
- f) Dialogue: Listen to speech for insight into characters and for clues pointing to meaning.

### 3. Setting

- a) Inner-Textual: Check the text for the story's temporal, geographical and cultural setting.
- b) Inter-Textual: Check the content for the story's role in the larger narrative framework.

### 4. Point of View

- a) Focalization: Notice whether the perspective is external (the reader's) or internal (the character's or narrator's).
- b) Omniscience: Identify narrator statements that give inside views or privileged information.
- c) Irony: Determine the occurrence of verbal, dramatic or situational irony.<sup>376</sup>

Alter's resistance to providing a "check list" as part of his conclusion is overcome with the realization "it may be helpful to keep certain features in mind, to ask ourselves certain questions, in order to direct the appropriate close attention on these highly laconic, finely articulated tales." Here, is his list of the things we should look for while reading Old Testament narratives:

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<sup>376</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 77-78.



1. Words. While the verbal medium of any literary narrative can never be entirely transparent, or indifferent, the choice or the mere presence of particular single words and phrases in the biblical tale has special weight precisely because biblical narrative is so laconic, especially compared to the kinds of fiction that have shaped our common reading habits.
2. Actions. Recurrence, parallels, analogy are the hallmarks of reported action in the biblical tale.
3. Dialogue. Everything in the world of biblical narrative ultimately gravitates toward dialogue.
4. Narration. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the role played by the narrator in the biblical tales is the way in which omniscience and inobtrusiveness are combined.<sup>377</sup>

Ska doesn't explicitly outline an interpretive strategy, but implies one by titling his first chapter "The First Steps of the Analysis." The inferred interpretive strategy, according to the order of his chapter titles, follows this investigative procedure:

1. Time
2. Plot
3. Narrator and Reader
4. Point of View
5. Characters

Ska refers to the "literary categories" as indicators of the way to proceed when one enters

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<sup>377</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 179 -183.

into a narrative.

The former models of interpretive strategies, rather than just providing a compass and map for the traveler to use on his/her journey through the biblical narratives, provide detailed directions in order that we may arrive at our desired destination<sup>378</sup> —the discovery of the author's intended meaning and significance when he wrote his story.

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<sup>378</sup> Ska, *"Our Fathers Have Told Us": Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* 94.

## **CHAPTER IV: LESSON PLANS**

The material in this thesis is meant to be part of the larger homiletics course dealing with preaching expository messages from various types of biblical literature found in the Old Testament.

### **PREPARING TO PREACH FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT: COURSE SYLLABUS**

#### **I. Course Description**

This course will focus on expositional and interpretive strategies for the narrative, poetic, wisdom, and prophetic genres of Old Testament literature and the application of those strategies to sermon preparation.

Through selective readings, reflective journaling, sermon preparation and delivery, small group interaction, and self-analysis students will understand and apply the basic interpretive strategies required for approaching each major Old Testament genre.

This course is designed for students who have previously been exposed to the theory and practice of a sermonic process that involves both exegetical and homiletical aspects of sermon preparation.

#### **II. Course Objectives**

By the end of this course of studies the student will:

1. Read the following Old Testament books: 1 Samuel, Proverbs, Psalm 1-50, and Daniel.
2. Be able to articulate the different genres found in the Old Testament and provide examples of each type.
3. Be able to list challenges and benefits of preaching from the Old Testament.

4. Be able to articulate the fundamental interpretive strategies unique to each Old Testament genre.
5. Submit written assignments that demonstrate a disciplined, organized, and efficient approach to interpreting each major Old Testament genre.
6. Preach a sermon based on an Old Testament passage of Scripture (i.e. A poem, narrative, wisdom, or prophetic literature.)

### III. Course Reading:

#### Required Reading:

Long, Thomas G., *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989.

Sandy, D. Brent and Ronald L. Giese Jr., Eds. *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995.

Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993.

Robinson, Haddon W., Ed. *Biblical Sermons*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1989.

#### Recommended Reading:

Achtemeier, Elizabeth. *Preaching from the Old Testament*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989.

Kaiser, Walter C. Jr. *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 2003.

#### IV. Course Schedule

- Session #1: Introduction to the Course: Preparing to Preach the Old Testament
- Session #2: Preaching the Old Testament
- Session #3: Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Choosing the Text
- Session #4: Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Hearing the Text
- Session #5: Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text
- Session #6: Preaching on the Psalms (Poetry)
- Session #7: Preaching on the Psalms (Poetry)
- Session #8: Preaching on Proverbs (Wisdom literature)
- Session #9: Preaching on Proverbs (Wisdom literature)
- Session #10: Preaching Prophetic Literature
- Session #11: Preaching Prophetic Literature
- Session #12: Class Presentations
- Session #13: Class Presentations

#### V. Course Requirements

- A. Regular class attendance.
- B. Participation in class activities and discussion.
- C. Each student will read and journal in advance the preparatory material assigned for that lecture (as well as any supplemental readings distributed in class) using the format below.

NOTE: Separate journal entries will be completed for each document read.

## READING JOURNAL

Date read: \_\_\_\_\_

- Summarize the reading in three or four succinct sentences.
- Identify ONE thing from the reading that “resonates” with you.
- Identify ONE thing that invites further investigation.

D. Each student will prepare and submit TWO written sermon manuscripts based on passages of Scripture taken from two different Old Testament genres. Along with the full manuscript the student will submit their interpretive work and a time sheet indicating the amount of time spent on each stage of the sermonic process.

E. Each student will prepare and preach ONE sermon based on a passage of Scripture taken from an Old Testament genre IN ADDITION to the ones used in the previous assignment. The student will provide a videocassette tape and have their sermon recorded for their personal review and evaluation.

The student’s self-evaluation will involve viewing the tape and completing a sermon evaluation form. The self-evaluation form is to be submitted one week after the sermon is preached.

## VI. Course Grading

|  |      |
|--|------|
| Reading Journal                        | 20%  |
| Written Sermons (2 sermons @ 25% each) | 50%  |
| Preaching (1-15 minute presentation)   | 15%  |
| Self-evaluation of sermon              | 15%  |
| TOTAL                                  | 100% |

### PREPARING TO PREACH OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

The following lectures use the material in this thesis project to teach students an interpretive strategy that will aid them when preparing to preach Old Testament narratives. They were prepared for presentation in three 50-minute undergraduate homiletic lectures. They can stand on their own or can be incorporated into a course on preaching the genre of the Old Testament.

## Session #1: Choosing the Text

### Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will be able to articulate six deterrents to preaching Old Testament narratives.
2. Students will be able to articulate six advantages of preaching Old Testament narratives.
3. Students will be able to identify an Old Testament narrative preaching text (i.e. a complete literary unit)

### Materials:

- Laptop computer, projector, and PowerPoint presentation
- Flip chart and markers
- Session handouts (distribute package containing notes for all 3 sessions)

### Methods:

- Direct teaching - PowerPoint and lecture
- Student presentations
- Storytelling / Demonstration
- KWL / Brainstorming
- Think · Pair · Share
- Class discussion

### Procedure:

#### A. Motivational Set:

1. Student introductions



Each student will present an oral mini-narrative telling their name, where they grew up and how they arrived at their present vocational circumstances.

## 2. Storytelling

Instructor presents a personal narrative demonstrating the characteristics that parallel those found in Old Testament narratives.

Born the second of three children to Robert and Joyce Boyd I grew up in a small, southwestern Ontario town. High school presented some unique challenges as I found myself, one the smallest of the smallest grade nine students to ever enter that institution (about eighty pounds soaking wet!), surrounded by about 1500 other identity-strugglers. I was in grade ten when I thought that I had discovered my ticket to fame. Collegiate wrestling became the thing to live for for the next several years.

During the summer months between grades twelve and thirteen I landed a construction job that took me away from home for a good part of the summer. During the previous academic year I had met a girl and had spent a lot of time with her and her family. So when the invitation came for me to join them for a week of family camping at the end of the summer the answer was an immediate “yes!” A holiday with my girlfriend; what more could a guy ask for? I don’t recall them mentioning that it was a church family camp that we would be attending. I do, however, remember arriving at the campground and noticing immediately that people were referring to “Jesus” and “Jesus Christ” in a way that was completely foreign to the construction site that I was familiar with.

At the mid-point of the week the Camp speaker shared a message that presented a comparison of the biblical descriptions of heaven and hell. He concluded his message with a verse of Scripture that says we can know that we have eternal life. If a person has Jesus they will go to heaven. If person does not have Jesus then hell will be their assignment. He invited anyone who didn't have Jesus but wanted him to come and join him at the front of the auditorium. I wanted to but I just couldn't go to the front. What would people think? What would my girlfriend think? I left the auditorium with a restlessness within me that did not subside until 4 a.m. the next morning when I got down on my knees and prayed: "God, please forgive me. Thank you for sending Jesus Christ to die for my sins. Help me to begin to live my life in a way that pleases you." At that very moment a peace swept into my life and I fell asleep confident that if I were to die before I awoke I would wake up in heaven. That was 30 years ago now and since that time I've had all kinds of life experiences—both good and difficult.

I finished my final year of high school and then headed off to the university of Guelph enrolled in an engineering program. I withdrew half way through my third semester of university due to my poor academic performance. Returning to Petrolia, I worked a construction job for the next year and half. During that time I was involved with a local church as much as time would allow and started investigating the possibility of

going to Bible College. To make a long story shorter, I ended up at Briercrest where I spent the next three years eventually graduating with a BRE in pastoral studies.

Following graduation I returned to Petrolia, married the girl of my dreams, accepted a position at Oxford Baptist Church in Woodstock, Ontario as an Associate Pastor, and was diagnosed with a brain tumor that required immediate surgery. While I recuperated and returned to work, Cynthia, my wife of just four months, appeared to be cracking under the pressures of life. As it turned out her emotional struggles were the early warning signs announcing the arrival of our first son. Josiah arrived a few weeks prior to our first wedding anniversary. Eighteen months later G.W. Michael arrived and we headed back to Briercrest where I served in the Counseling department and began work on a Masters degree.

A year later we left Briercrest to join another couple in Winnipeg in a bi-vocational, co-pastoring, church-planting adventure with the Associated Gospel Churches of Canada. After two and a half years of ministry we moved back to London, Ontario now with another son who had been born in Winnipeg. I worked construction for the next eighteen months.

Calvary Church in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan called me to be their pastor in 1990 and I served in that role for the next 11 years. During my seventh year at Calvary Church I applied and was accepted to begin work on a Doctor of Ministry degree through Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

for which this teaching assignment is a requirement for graduation. Also during our time in Saskatoon my mother at the age of 59 was diagnosed with cancer and died just 8 weeks later. That was a particularly difficult time for me personally.

In 2001 I accepted an invitation to move back to Ontario and become the Senior Pastor of Grace Chapel, Oakville where I am presently serving. Our three sons no longer live with us. Mike and Luke are members of the Canadian Senior Men's Gymnastic team and are training and enrolled at the University of Calgary. Our oldest son Josiah graduated from McMaster University and is presently working on a master of Kinesiology degree at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. Cynthia my wife teaches grade three in a private school in Oakville, and is in the final stages of a Master of Education degree. That's my story.

I remember hearing a little poem years ago that goes something like this:

We are writing a story, a chapter each day,  
By the deeds that we do,  
By the words that we say.  
People read what we write,  
Whether honest or true,  
Say, what is the gospel according to YOU?

### 3. Think · Pair · Share

Take a few moments and write down 3 characteristics of stories that come to mind as a result of what you just experienced. Each student will then share his or her three ideas with a fellow student. Students will be given an opportunity to report their ideas to the entire class. Point a) will be given as an example of a characteristic of stories.

Some Characteristics of Stories:

- a. There are gaps in the story
- b. Stories capture attention
- c. Stories involve action
- d. Stories don't tell everything we may want to know
- e. The storyteller's perspective will determine how the reader/listener experiences and understands the story.

Thomas Long writes:

“Stories are, in some ways, notoriously ambiguous and inefficient devices for conveying truth, and it is a puzzle worth pondering that narrative is the dominant form of choice for biblical writers.”<sup>379</sup>

For the next three lectures we want to talk about stories. Not my story or your stories but the biblical stories found in the Old Testament.

#### 4. KWL (**K**now, **W**ant to know, **L**earned)

Have students brainstorm what they *know* about Old Testament narratives and record all responses on one sheet of chart paper displaying the letter ‘K’. The instructor will facilitate and record but not evaluate.

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<sup>379</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989) 66.

Now have students brainstorm what they *want to know* about Old Testament narratives and record all responses on a separate sheet of chart paper displaying the letter ‘W’. The instructor will facilitate and record but not evaluate.

Display chart paper with the letter ‘L’ explaining to the students that they will have an opportunity to express what they **L**earned at the end of the Session #5.

All three brainstorming posters will remain on display in the session room throughout the narrative study as a visual reminder.

#### B. Lesson:

##### 1. Why Old Testament narratives are seldom chosen as preaching texts

Steven Mathewson in The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narratives reports: “Even in the preaching of some premier Bible expositors, Old Testament stories rarely make it into the starting lineup. Instead, they ride the bench.” He goes on to mention John MacArthur specifically, who justifies his rare use of Old Testament stories by referring to “his responsibility to herald the new covenant.”<sup>380</sup> MacArthur’s admission suggests the first deterrent for choosing an Old Testament narrative as a preaching text:

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<sup>380</sup> Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002) 23.

a. The accessibility of the New Testament

The New Testament “seems more manageable.” The content and the literature are often more familiar and relevant to both the modern preacher and his audience.<sup>381</sup> The New Testament epistles are direct and present a logical progression of thought, ideas, and concepts that are user-friendly.

b. The remoteness of Old Testament

The setting, the culture, the language, and the passing of time make it difficult for modern interpreters to relate to the world of Old Testament narratives. Old Testament stories are set in a world defined by an old covenant, a Promised Land, a monarchy, the conquest of Canaan, sacrifices, the Law, and direct conversations with God.<sup>382</sup> All these elements of Old Testament stories are strange and foreign to the preacher and his audience. In addition, the sheer size of the Old Testament and the length of the stories themselves discourage preachers from choosing them as preaching texts.<sup>383</sup>

c. Familiar sermon preparation techniques prove to be ineffective

Most novice preachers are introduced to the sermonic process using interpretive strategies designed for use when working with New Testament didactic literature. At the same time their introduction to Old Testament literature is often presented as a history of the nation of Israel. Borden admits that “many basic exegetical courses in seminaries only teach how to exegete didactic or epistolary literature. As a result, many preachers have no idea how to study, let alone preach, passages of poetry, narrative, proverb, apocalypse,

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<sup>381</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 24.

<sup>382</sup> J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2001) 312.

<sup>383</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 24.

and parable. The didactic style of literature found in the epistles is compatible with the familiar sermonic form. It is much easier to fit a square into a rectangle than into a triangle.”<sup>384</sup> Our tendency is to approach and preach every passage with the same methodology. But narrative literature deserves and demands unique treatment in order to discover its meaning. David Deuel places “substituting the preacher’s conceptual structure for the narrative’s unifying structure” at the top of his list of “possible ways of mishandling narratives.”<sup>385</sup>

d. No appropriate interpretive strategy for narrative literature

Without a clear interpretive strategy designed specifically for Old Testament narratives, outlining a preferred path from start to finish, the interpreter/preacher will wander aimlessly in search of the meaning of the Old Testament story. Part of the wandering is the result of being confronted with so many different possibilities to consider and “clues” to investigate. Where does one begin?

e. The time and effort required for determining the meaning of a story

Old Testament stories “speak indirectly and implicitly.”<sup>386</sup> A cursory reading, therefore, will fail to notice the ambiguities and subtle clues that reveal the intended meaning of the text leading to partial observations and a premature interpretation. Stories need to be read carefully and thoughtfully. According to Walter Kaiser: “There is simply no substitute for *taking the time* to determine the meaning of the narrative.”<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>384</sup> Paul Borden, “Expository Preaching,” *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, ed. Michael Duduit (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1992) 65.

<sup>385</sup> David C. Deuel, “Expository Preaching from Old Testament Narrative,” *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, ed. Richard L. Mayhue and Robert L. Thomas (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992) 281.

<sup>386</sup> J.P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Ineke Smit, 1995 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999) 149.

<sup>387</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “Narrative,” *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*, ed. D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese Jr. (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995) 86.



f. Reserving Old Testament stories for illustrations and children's ministries

The New Testament endorses the use of the Old Testament stories for illustrative purposes (e.g. 1 Cor. 10:6). David Deuel, however, provides a cautionary note: "They must not be used *solely* as a resource of illustrations for the rest of the Bible."<sup>388</sup> Individual stories have a message of their own that needs to be heard.

Steve Mathewson identifies "our tendency to view stories as fluff. ... As a result, many churches teach Bible stories to children downstairs in the basement while adults study Paul's epistles upstairs in the auditorium."<sup>389</sup>

2. Reasons for choosing to preach Old Testament narratives

a. Stories are engaging

People identify with and are captivated by stories. They are interesting because they have the power to suggest possibilities for our own lives. Long, identifies two ways in which stories impact readers: (1) by making the reader one of the characters or (2) by making a claim concerning the nature of life, a claim about which the reader must make a decision.<sup>390</sup> The reader will either accept or reject the view of life as presented in the story.

b. The Old Testament stories are foundational to God's special revelation

We believe the Scriptures are a progressive revelation of the person, plans and purposes of God. Later revelation builds upon earlier revelation. Jesus announced that he did not come to destroy; rather He extended, expanded and internalized the teaching of the

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<sup>388</sup> Deuel, "Expository Preaching from Old Testament Narrative" 273.

<sup>389</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 22.

<sup>390</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* 74.

Law.<sup>391</sup> The Old Testament stories provide the foundational material on which the New Testament is built.

c. Biblical narratives present God actively involved in the human experience. The stories present God in a way that is not as abstract as theological categories tend to make him—omnipresent, omnipotent, etc. If these theological labels are not balanced with the personal aspects of God, they will isolate us from God. God becomes an impersonal, distant abstraction similar to “The Force” in Star Wars. “The Lord is not something abstract that you feel, but rather a person who speaks, relates, gets angry, hurts, changes his mind, argues, and loves. He relates to people on a human level, but he continues to be more than us, still above us. He is the hero of the story.”<sup>392</sup>

Daniel chapter 2 introduces the king of Babylon with a troubled mind resulting from a dream he does not understand. He summons the magicians, sorcerers and astrologers inviting them to tell him what he dreamed (the test of authenticity) and what the dream means. Their response: “What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, *and they do not live among men.*” As the story unfolds we discover that Daniel knows a god who lives among men. Daniel’s god proves his presence by enabling Daniel to reveal the content and an interpretation of the king’s dream. “Biblical narratives tell us about things that happened—but not just any things. Their purpose is to show God at work in his creation and among his people. The narratives glorify him, help

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<sup>391</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (1983-1985. 3 vols.; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1992), 197.

<sup>392</sup> Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* 310-1.

us to understand and appreciate him, and give us a picture of his providence and protection.”<sup>393</sup>

d. Stories are actual and concrete rather than abstract

Old Testament storytellers recreate the actual scene and event in sufficient detail so that the reader can imaginatively experience them. “The writer even quotes the very speeches of the characters, and nothing can be more actual and concrete than that.”<sup>394</sup> Placing the events of Biblical narratives within an historic context promotes realism. For example, turn to the book of Daniel and notice the opening words: “In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.” Daniel’s story is situated in a specific time and place in Israel’s history. The vivid and detailed descriptions included in these Old Testament stories paint pictures in the minds readers/listeners. Look up Judges 3:21-22. The story of Ehud’s assassination of Elgon provides a good example:

Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king’s belly. Even the handle sank in after the blade, which came out his back. Ehud did not pull the sword out, and the fat closed in over it.  
(Judg. 3:21-22)

Kaiser reports that “no form of communication is more vivid” than narrative literature.<sup>395</sup>

Detailed descriptions, historic settings, dialogue and actions/reactions of the characters give biblical stories concreteness.

e. Stories offer a powerful means of persuasion

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<sup>393</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, 2nd ed., 1981 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993) 79.

<sup>394</sup> Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*, 2nd ed., 1987 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1992) 13.

<sup>395</sup> Kaiser Jr., "Narrative" 69-70.

The Bible includes stories where one person persuaded another by using a story. Probably the most familiar would be the story Nathan uses to confront king David (2 Samuel 12:1-14). King David, having listened carefully to Nathan's story "burned with anger against the man" prior to pronouncing his judgment on the story's villain. King David's response to the story was used to persuade him to respond appropriately when Nathan reveals the true identity of the villain. King David's response to Nathan's story demonstrates the persuasive power of stories.

f. Narratives can help us to understand didactic literature

Turn in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 12. In this passage Jesus refers to an Old Testament story to correct a misunderstanding and erroneous application of the Sabbath law. (Matthew 12:3-4; the Old Testament story is 1 Samuel 21)

3. How to choose an Old Testament narrative preaching text

Haddon Robinson in Biblical Preaching introduces this initial stage of his sermonic process with a rabbit stew recipe. The recipe begins with: "First catch the rabbit." The point is that we need to put first things first. Without the rabbit there is no stew.<sup>396</sup> The first step in preaching an Old Testament narrative involves choosing a preaching text consisting of *a complete literary unit*. Mathewson points out that the "limits of a story (where it begins and ends) are determined primarily by analyzing the plot."<sup>397</sup> He breaks down the plot into four parts: exposition, crisis, resolution, and sometimes a conclusion. Fokkelman, however, views the plot as having a "head and tail" that determine the

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<sup>396</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1980) 53.

<sup>397</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 32.

boundaries of the story.<sup>398</sup> Kaiser uses the terms “beginning, middle, and end”<sup>399</sup> to describe the three elements of the plot. Long uses the same terminology but clarifies the linkages between the three elements: “The beginning of a story always describes a situation of need that must be addressed through an action of some kind. The middle grows out of the beginning by describing what is done about this needed action. The end in turn grows out of the middle by showing what happens as a result of the action taken in the middle. At the same time, the end relates to the beginning resolving its situation of need.”<sup>400</sup>

The transition points between the elements of the plot are not always as obvious as interpreters would like. Mathewson likens it to the shift from first to second gear in an automatic transmission.<sup>401</sup> The important part is not determining the exact point of transition but the beginning and end of the story. The beginning of a story provides the reader with the “primary information and basic background materials”<sup>402</sup> to enable them to enter the world of the story. The setting (e.g. time and place), the main characters, and the introduction of a problem to be resolved connect the reader to the story. Ask students to read Genesis 3.

CLASS DISCUSSION: Facilitate a time of classroom interaction around the following points of interest:

- Would Genesis 3:1-6 be considered a complete literary unit (i.e. a story)? Why or Why not?

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<sup>398</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* 76.

<sup>399</sup> Kaiser Jr., "Narrative" 72.

<sup>400</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* 71.

<sup>401</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 44.

<sup>402</sup> Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) 33.

- Identify the material presented in the introduction to this story. (i.e. main characters, setting, the need that must be addressed)

Summary:

- Throughout the ages human experience has been interpreted and communicated in the form of stories. The Old Testament includes these very stories.
- There are deterrents to preaching Old Testament narratives but knowing what these stories offer motivates us to include Old Testament narratives in our preaching calendars.
- Our Old Testament narrative “interpretive strategy” begins by identifying a complete literary unit as a preaching text.

Homework Assignment:

Working in partnership with one other classmate, each student will: a) choose an Old Testament story (i.e. a complete literary unit) as a preaching text using the plot analysis; and b) determine the background information presented at the beginning of the story (i.e. main characters, setting, and the situation of need which must be addressed).

Students will be prepared to give a brief oral report of the findings at the beginning of the next session.

## Session #2: Hearing the Text

### Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will “hear the text” by knowing and applying five essentials of a literary analysis for Old Testament narratives.

### Materials:

- Laptop computer, projector, and PowerPoint presentation
- Flip chart and markers
- Session #4 handouts

### Methods:

- Direct teaching – lecture and PowerPoint presentation
- Student presentations
- Student discovery
- Demonstration
- Think · Pair · Share
- Small group discussion

### Procedure:

#### A. Motivational Set:

##### 1. Student Reports

Each student will present a brief oral report including: a) the biblical reference of an Old Testament story (i.e. a complete literary unit) that they have chosen as a preaching text using the plot analysis; and b) the background information presented at the beginning of the story (i.e. main characters, setting, and the situation of need which must be

addressed). Students will be asked to respond to any questions that classmates may have regarding their choice of preaching text and background information.

## 2. Think · Pair · Share

Each student will record three observations/implications related to “hearing” Biblical narratives according to the following quote. Each student will share his or her observations with one other student. Students will be given opportunity to report their observations/implications to the class.

QUOTE: “There is a greater, more important truth, which is that these texts are well-written. If they are then so fortunate as to meet a good listener, they will come into their own without having to be pushed into compartments “far away,” “long ago” and “very different.” As products of a deliberate and meticulous designing intelligence they have been crafted to speak for themselves, provided there is a competent reader listening closely. They are, after some training on our part, extremely able to reveal and explain themselves.”<sup>403</sup>

### B. Lesson:

A competent reader who listens closely to the text will approach Old Testament narratives with an awareness typical of homicide detectives as they approach the scene of a crime. Duvall & Hays agree: “Don’t take shortcuts! Do not assume that these Old Testament narratives are simple stories! Observe! Probe into the text like Sherlock Holmes does into a crime scene.”<sup>404</sup> To probe into the text the interpreter does not use the tools belonging to criminology and forensic science, but the tools that belong to the

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<sup>403</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* 21.

<sup>404</sup> Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* 296.



discipline of literary analysis. Literary analysis treats Old Testament narratives like works of art in which all the fine details are carefully examined and appreciated. Pratt reminds us that “interpreting Old Testament narratives involves both human and divine effort. We look to the Spirit as the power enabling us to interpret, and we look to the hermeneutical skills as the tools of our trade.”<sup>405</sup> This session is designed to enable students to become competent readers who listen carefully to what the story is saying by knowing and applying five essentials of a literary analysis for Old Testament narratives.

### 1. An investigative reading of the preaching text

A careful reading of the text is not something we should assume, take for granted, or treat lightly. Fee and Stuart identify a careful reading of the text as “the key to good exegesis.”<sup>406</sup> We read at different levels. For example, we read junk mail differently than we would read a homiletics textbook. You wouldn’t read an e-mail from someone you love the same way you would read a homiletics textbook. You may be able to testify that you have read all three documents but your levels of attention and comprehension would vary considerably. Pratt insists, “Nothing can replace looking at the special revelation itself.”<sup>407</sup> We can improve the level of our attention and comprehension by using a pencil and paper to record any questions and/or observations that come to mind as we read the biblical text.

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<sup>405</sup> Richard L. Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1990; Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1993), 7.

<sup>406</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* 22.

<sup>407</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 40.

STUDENT DISCOVERY: Turn to the sheet included with the session handouts entitled “Genesis 22:1-19 (New International Version).” Students will read the text carefully writing notes as they read (i.e. questions and/or initial observations and thoughts). After completing this exercise students will turn to the sheet included in session handouts with the five translations of “Genesis 22:1-19.” Students will read each verse of each translation and record questions and/or observation and thoughts on the previous sheet. Two or three students will be given the opportunity to share some of their notes with the class.

2. Become familiar with the setting of the preaching text

Richard Pratt includes the following illustration in his book He Gave Us Stories:

John was walking downtown one afternoon when he saw a small piece of paper blowing down the sidewalk. He picked it up and read, “GET HELP!” John was a competent reader of English; he had a basic understanding of what “get” and “help” mean. At first, John thought he knew what the note meant. But two strangers suddenly came up to him. The first one pointed at a passing car and said, “I saw where that note came from. A little boy dropped it as he was pulled into that car. You'd better call the police.” But the second person interrupted. “Don’t listen to him,” she insisted. “I wrote the note for a friend and dropped it by accident. My friend is sick, and I want him to get some help.” Now John was completely confused. Was the note a call for help or friendly advice? John could not be certain, so he wadded the note in his hands and threw it

back onto the sidewalk. “I don’t know what to do,” he exclaimed angrily.

“This note can mean many things.”<sup>408</sup>

Becoming familiar with the setting or context of a story will prepare the interpreter to discover the true meaning or significance of the story by eliminating some of the “many things” it could mean. Setting involves both the story’s literary setting, as well as its historical, cultural, and geographic setting.

a. The literary setting

The literary setting involves both an immediate or micro context and the larger or macro context. The larger context refers to the entire book in which the story is found.

Contextual information related to the overall theme of biblical books can be found in many study Bibles and Bible dictionaries. Reading and summarizing the stories preceding and following the one being considered can determine the immediate or micro context of the story. Chisholm makes the point: “Just as one cannot assess the significance of a scene in a movie apart from the film’s overall plot and message, so one must attempt to understand how each individual narrative in a biblical book or complex of books (e.g. Joshua - Kings) contributes to and is impacted by its larger context.”<sup>409</sup> The meaning and significance of a story will fit with the theme and purpose of the larger literary context in which it is set.

b. The historic, cultural, and geographic setting

The historic, cultural, and geographic setting presents the stage on which these stories are played out.

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<sup>408</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 110.

<sup>409</sup> Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998) 168.

Where did the story take place?

What was the author's purpose in writing this book?

When did the story take place?

How might the original audience have responded to this story?

Remember these stories were not written directly to us; we are overhearing stories told to others.<sup>410</sup>

CLASS DISCUSSION: Ask for a student to read the "title and background" (from a Study Bible) to the book of 1 Kings. Another student will be asked to do the same for the book of 1 Chronicles. Knowing that the book of Kings was written during Israel's exile and the book of Chronicles was written following Israel's exile: Will that information influence our interpretation of the stories included in these books? Explain.

These biblical stories are like links in a chain or pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Discovering as much as we can about the literary and historical, cultural, and geographic contexts will help us to discern the meaning of the individual stories.

### 3. Develop a timeline for the preaching text

The perception of time provides essential information in the quest for understanding the meaning of a biblical story.<sup>411</sup> A distinction needs to be made between two types of time: "narrative" (or "narrated") time and "narration" time.

- Narration time is the amount of time it takes the reader to read the story.
- Narrative or narrated time consists of time within the story.

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<sup>410</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 15.

<sup>411</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 105.

The storytellers control the timing of the events, dialogues, and movements within the story. In telling their stories they leave gaps to speed the story along (acceleration) or use dialogue, for example, to slow the story to a crawl (retardation). “The more important the subject matter, the longer its time of narration.”<sup>412</sup> In our last session together I told you a version of my story in which I went from birth to high school in two sentences. That’s a gap! The events leading to my conversion, however, were allowed to expand to almost half a page.

DEMONSTRATION: How many are familiar television drama *Without a Trace*?

Constructing timelines of the missing person’s last known activities aids detectives in solving the case. A timeline can provide essential information as we attempt to discover the meaning and significance of these biblical stories.

With student input, locate the sequence of events in each of the following stories on a timeline noting the number of verses used to describe each event.

- Genesis 3:1-6
- Genesis 22:1-19

The “focal points”<sup>413</sup> of the story are determined by identifying the storyteller’s investments of narrative time.

#### 4. Take inventory of the characters within the preaching text

Characters are indispensable in Old Testament narratives. Attempts to interpret these stories must consider how the individual characters are presented and their individual contributions to the development of the plot. The detail that the narrators provide about

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<sup>412</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 108.

<sup>413</sup> Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, trans. Dorothea Shefer-Vanson (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1979; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd., 2000) 143.

specific characters is called *characterization*. The narrator can provide these details “directly” or “indirectly.” Direct characterization is provided by the narrator or from one of the characters in the story, while indirect characterization is revealed by the character’s own actions, reactions, and dialogue.<sup>414</sup> 1 Samuel 1:6-7 presents an example of indirect characterization. What would you conclude about Peninnah? (She is a person given to jealousy). Classifications will help interpreters to organize the descriptive material provided by the author about the specific characters within the story.

a. Character classification based on personality

One approach to character classification is based on the amount of information provided by the narrator about the characters’ personalities. *Round characters* have many traits, are complex, and therefore less predictable, but more real. Characters portraying a single personality trait are said to be *flat characters*. An *agent* has no personality at all.<sup>415</sup>

b. Character classification based on role

A second approach to character classification categorizes the main characters in relation to the roles they play in the story. *Protagonists* are central characters in that they are indispensable to the plot of the story. *Antagonists* are those individuals and forces resisting and preventing the protagonist from accomplishing his or her desired outcomes.<sup>416</sup> In the Canadian parliamentary system they are referred to as the “official opposition.” *Agents* have very little presence and serve to move the plot forward.

c. God and the narrator

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<sup>414</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 74.

<sup>415</sup> Kaiser Jr., "Narrative" 74.

<sup>416</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 58.

When taking an inventory of the characters within any story the interpreter must be sure to include God and the narrator. Although “the intensity of God’s presence”<sup>417</sup> may vary from story to story God is a central character in biblical narratives. According to Duvall & Hays: “If we miss God in the story, then we have missed the story ... One of the central purposes of this material is to reveal God to us.”<sup>418</sup> The narrator is “an unnamed, abstract figure who mediates between us and the story.”<sup>419</sup> Although the Hebrew narrator is “drastically selective”<sup>420</sup> he knows everything there is to know about the world of the story including the feelings and thoughts of God. Biblical narrators are omniscient.

STUDENT DISCOVERY: Using the “Inventory of Characters” chart distributed in the handout package each student will record the appropriate information from the Old Testament story they chose as a preaching text. Students will partner up and share their findings.

“If you take time to classify the characters, to notice how the writer has characterized them, and to listen to their speech, you’re well on your way to understanding the author’s intended meaning.”<sup>421</sup>

##### 5. Distinguish the dialogue from the narrative of the preaching text

Conversations in biblical narratives usually occur between two characters. The “lean, spare style”<sup>422</sup> employed by Old Testament authors influenced the way they recorded dialogue. Conversations within biblical stories are highly concentrated and stylized,

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<sup>417</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 130.

<sup>418</sup> Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* 310-1.

<sup>419</sup> Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* 94.

<sup>420</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) 126.

<sup>421</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 65.

<sup>422</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 60-1.

devoid of idle chatter, and any details that do not fulfill a clear function.<sup>423</sup> Kaiser, however, views dialogue as being so central in Old Testament storytelling that it “often carries the theme of the passage.”<sup>424</sup> Alter observes, “As a rule, when a narrative event in the Bible seems important, the writer will render it mainly through dialogue.”<sup>425</sup> The contributions of the narrator, however, must not be overlooked or taken lightly. Without his statements the story would not make sense because specific motives, thoughts, hidden actions, and the like would not be known ... and these comments become decisive in ultimately determining the meaning of the story.<sup>426</sup> Fokkelman’s recommendation to those who would like to “dig a little deeper” is to type out the story and indent all direct speech by one or two spaces in order to separate it from the narrator’s contribution.<sup>427</sup>

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION: In groups of four record the three most significant observations from the Dialogue Chart of Genesis 3:1-7 included in the handout package. A spokesperson from each group will be given opportunity to report the group’s three most significant observations to the class.

CONCLUDING QUOTE: “All these categories are indicators of the way to proceed when one enters into a narrative. They are never pigeon-holes to arrange neatly and permanently the texts ... They are rather a compass and maps that the traveller uses for a journey through the Biblical narratives.”<sup>428</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* 148.

<sup>424</sup> Kaiser Jr., “Narrative” 75.

<sup>425</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 182.

<sup>426</sup> Paul Borden, “Is There Really One Big Idea in That Story?” *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching: Connecting the Bible to People*, ed. Keith Willhite and Scott M. Gibson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998) 73-76.

<sup>427</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* 74.

<sup>428</sup> Ska, “Our Fathers Have Told Us”: *Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* 94.



### Summary:

The five essentials of a literary analysis for Old Testament narratives are:

- An investigative reading of the preaching text
- Become familiar with the setting of the preaching text
- Develop a timeline for the preaching text
- Take an inventory of the characters within the preaching text
- Distinguish the dialogue from the narrative portions of the preaching text

### Homework Assignment:

Each student will read “The Narrative Structure and Interpretation of Genesis XXVI 1-33” by George G. Nicol.<sup>429</sup>

Each student will complete journal entries using the following format:

|   |
|---|
| <p style="text-align: center;">READING JOURNAL</p> <p>Date read: _____</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Summarize the reading in three or four succinct sentences.</li><li>• Identify <u>ONE</u> thing from the reading that “resonates” with you.</li><li>• Identify <u>ONE</u> thing that invites further investigation.</li></ul> |
|---|

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<sup>429</sup> George G. Nicol, "The Narrative Structure and Interpretation of Genesis XXVI 1-33," *Vetus Testamentum* 46.3 Jul. 1996: 339-60, *JSTOR*, 20 Jan 2006 <<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0042-4935%28199607%2946%3A3%3C339%3ATNSAIO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-R>>.

Students will be prepared to give a brief oral report of their journal entries at the beginning of the next session.

### Session #3: Interpreting the Text

#### Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will be able to articulate and give examples of three common literary techniques employed by Old Testament storytellers.
2. Students will develop an exegetical outline of an Old Testament story.
3. Students will use an exegetical outline to establish the meaning and significance of an Old Testament story.

#### Materials:

- Laptop computer, projector, and PowerPoint presentation
- Flip chart and markers
- Session #5 handouts

#### Methods:

- Direct teaching – lecture and PowerPoint presentation
- Class discussion
- Small group discussion

#### Procedure:

##### A. Motivational Set:

1. Class discussion

Students will be given an opportunity share and discuss highlights from their journaling in response to reading “The Narrative Structure and Interpretation of Genesis XXVI 1-33” by George G. Nicol.<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>430</sup> Nicol, "The narrative structure and interpretation of genesis XXVI 1-33."

B. Lesson:

1. Three common literary techniques employed by Old Testament storytellers

a. Point of view

Point of view addresses the perspective from which the story is being told. From whose set of eyes is the reader seeing the events unfold? In a film, the questions would be:

“Where is the eye of the camera?” and “From where does the camera film the scene?”

The point of view or perspective may also be referred to as “focalization.” Ska identifies three possible points of view:

- The *external point of view* positions the reader outside the story. The narrator makes readers the observers of the event.
- The *internal point of view* positions the reader inside the story. Readers accompany the character so that we see, hear, and feel what the character perceives.
- The *view from behind* takes place when the narrator reveals the inner thoughts and motivations of the characters in the story.<sup>431</sup>

Mathewson summarizes this literary technique: “The narrator’s point of view is the perspective through which we observe and evaluate everything connected with the story.”<sup>432</sup>

STUDENT DISCOVERY: Students will read the following passages independently to identify the points of view. A brief class discussion will follow this exercise, drawing

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<sup>431</sup> Ska, “Our Fathers Have Told Us”: *Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* 66.

<sup>432</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 71.

attention to Genesis 22:4 and Genesis 22:13 as examples of internal focalization.

- Genesis 3:1-6
- Genesis 22:1-19

#### b. Repetition

Old Testament writers used repetition to accomplish what we accomplish today through larger type sizes, bold or italic font styles, or highlighting.<sup>433</sup> These ancient authors used verbatim repetition to draw readers' attention to the repeated material. It's as though they were saying: "Don't miss this!" or "This is important!" Alter, however, identifies repetition as "one of the most imposing barriers that stands between the modern reader and ... this habit of constantly restating material is bound to give us trouble, especially in a narrative that otherwise adheres so evidently to the strictest economy of means."<sup>434</sup>

Repetition can involve words, phrases, or themes. Ryken suggests that this literary technique provides "the best clue to what a story is about."<sup>435</sup> Kaiser agrees: "Repetitions are a most valuable part of the biblical text and are not to be seen as marks of sloppiness by the scribes or as an opportunity for excision of the material by modern critical scholars. Instead, they help direct our attention to things in the text that we might otherwise have overlooked."<sup>436</sup>

Ask student volunteers to read aloud the following examples of repetition:

- 2 Samuel 18:33 – repetition of words
- 1 Kings 20:23-25 – repetition of a phrase

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<sup>433</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 51.

<sup>434</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 79.

<sup>435</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* 83.

<sup>436</sup> Kaiser Jr., "Narrative" 78.

### c. Irony

Biblical authors employed two types of irony in their stories: verbal irony and dramatic irony. Verbal irony occurs when a character says one thing and means another—often the very opposite of what a literal meaning would imply.

CLASS DISCUSSION: Ask a student volunteer to read aloud 2 Samuel 6:20. Facilitate a class discussion on the difference between what was said and what was meant.

Follow-up this discussion by asking another student volunteer to read aloud 2 Samuel 11:11. What is happening here?

Dramatic irony occurs when a character in the story says something but has no idea of the full implications of what he or she is saying. Uriah, as far as we know, had no idea that he was delivering a stinging rebuke to the king of Israel. Bar-Efrat explains that sometimes the plot of biblical narratives creates ironic situations in which “the character knows less than the reader, or unknowingly does things which are not in his or her best interest, or from the course of events leading to results which are the reverse of the character’s aspirations.”<sup>437</sup>

## 2. Interpreting an Old Testament story

Pratt exposes the vulnerability of Old Testament stories: “Too often Christians read Old Testament stories as if they were empty canisters just waiting to be filled with meaning. We simply pour in our theological convictions. We shrug our shoulders and concede that these texts can mean just about anything we want them to mean ... many formal approaches to hermeneutics find the primary locus of meaning in the reader’s

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<sup>437</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* 125.

predispositions rather than in the objective, authoritative text.”<sup>438</sup> In order to avoid exploiting this vulnerability our interpretation must begin with an exegetical outline.

a. Create an exegetical outline of the story

The first step in developing an exegetical outline for a story requires the interpreter to subdivide the larger narrative into smaller more manageable units. Kaiser explains that it is “the task of the interpreter to identify each of the scenes, just as one would break up a long prose passage into paragraphs. Once the divisions have been made, a brief synopsis of what is in each scene is most helpful.”<sup>439</sup> Ska clarifies the purpose of this division is “not to dissect or to atomize the text” but to help the interpreter see the dynamics of a narrative.<sup>440</sup> The main criteria for identifying a scene are a change in time, a change of location, or the departure or arrival of characters. It may be helpful to imagine that you are a movie director shooting a story. Each scene is filmed in a certain way to tell the story.<sup>441</sup> We must remember, however that these divisions and subdivisions are somewhat arbitrary because “these texts do not explicitly mark where scenes begin and end ... We must remain flexible as we divide Old Testament stories into scenes.”<sup>442</sup> Once the interpreter has identified the scenes of the narrative, summary statements are written for each scene. These descriptive summary statements should be as “simple as possible without misrepresenting the text.”<sup>443</sup> Including as many of the biblical author’s actual words as possible in the summary sentences will help to curtail interpretative tendencies. Borden admits, “This is difficult. Yet our inability to deal with story as story requires this

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<sup>438</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 25.

<sup>439</sup> Kaiser Jr., "Narrative" 71-72.

<sup>440</sup> Ska, *"Our Fathers Have Told Us": Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative* 36.

<sup>441</sup> Borden, "Is there really one big idea in that story?" 73-76.

<sup>442</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 152-3.

<sup>443</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 164.

step. We must force ourselves to learn what is in the story before we begin to ask why.”<sup>444</sup> Mathewson provides the following summation of this process: “The best way to create an outline is to organize the story along the lines of its plot elements. If more than two or three scenes or episodes make up a plot element, then list them as sub points in the outline. Finally, write out outline points as sentences ... this is not a sermon outline; it is an exegetical outline.”<sup>445</sup>

b. Articulate the story’s exegetical idea

Steven Mathewson acknowledges that identifying the exegetical idea is “one of the most challenging stages in the interpretive process”<sup>446</sup> The “single sentence” is formulated by answering two questions: What is the author talking about? (subject), and What does he say about what he is talking about? (complement). The answers to these two questions are combined so that they form one complete sentence, which has been labeled: the exegetical idea, the big idea, the central truth, the thesis statement, the summary sentence, the proposition, the point of the passage or the focus of the story. Dr. Haddon Robinson, if not the originator, has certainly popularized this step of the interpretive process within homiletic circles: “Finding the subject and complement does not start when we begin construction of our sermons. We pursue the subject and complement when we study the biblical text. Because each paragraph, section, or subsection of Scripture contains an idea, we do not understand a passage until we can state its subject and complement exactly. While other questions emerge in the struggle to understand the meaning of a

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<sup>444</sup> Borden, “Is there really one big idea in that story?” 75.

<sup>445</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 55.

<sup>446</sup> Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* 81.



biblical writer, the two (“What precisely is the author talking about?” and “What is the author saying about what he is talking about?”) are fundamental.”<sup>447</sup>

SMALL GROUP INTERACTION: Divide the class into groups comprising of three or four students in each group. Using the Genesis 22:1-19 handout sheet:

- Identify the scenes of the story.
- Write summary statements for each of the scenes.
- Write a summary statement for the beginning, middle, and end segments of the story’s plot.
- Write an exegetical idea for the complete story.

Each group will write their “exegetical idea” and “exegetical outline” on flip chart paper and present it to the class. Comparisons and conclusions will be drawn from the work of each group.

- c. Use reference resources to validate the exegetical outline and exegetical idea of the preaching text

So far this interpretive strategy has made little or no reference to the work of others. The time has come for the interpreter to investigate what other scholars have discovered in their interpretive efforts regarding the preaching text. Pratt’s challenge reminds us that interpreting Old Testament narratives is not to be a solo adventure carried out in isolation from the influence of others: “responsible interpreters will not turn away from the teaching of others. We must devote ourselves to reading contemporary commentaries and theologies, and listening to others as we interpret Old Testament narratives.”<sup>448</sup> Exposure

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<sup>447</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* 42.

<sup>448</sup> Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* 72-3.

to the work of others will keep us from error and arrogance as we humbly interact and validate the work of God that has taken place in our hearts and minds.

Summary:

- Three common literary techniques employed by Old Testament storytellers are: point of view, repetition, and irony.
- Dividing the story into scenes enables the interpreter to develop an exegetical outline.
- Exegetical outlines reveal the biblical author's development of the story so that the exegetical idea can be articulated.

## SUPPORTING MATERIAL: SESSION POWER POINT PRESENTATIONS

## Preparing to Preach From the Old Testament

Session #3:

Preparing to Preach Old Testament  
Narratives:

### Choosing the Text

George Boyd

1

## Session Objectives

- Students will be able to articulate six deterrents to preaching Old Testament narratives
- Students will have gained an appreciation for the value of preaching Old Testament stories
- Students will be able to identify a preaching text (i.e. a complete literary unit)

2

## Student Introductions

Mini-narratives consisting of:

- Your given name
- Where you spent most of your childhood
- What influenced you to choose to study at Briercrest

3

## Storytelling

A personal narrative

4

## Characteristics of a Story

- There are gaps in the story
- Stories capture attention
- Stories involve action (i.e. there is movement)
- Stories don't tell everything we may want to know
- The storyteller's perspective will determine how the reader/listener experiences and understands the story

5

## Characteristics of a Story

"Stories are, in some ways, notoriously ambiguous and inefficient devices for conveying truth, and it is a puzzle worth pondering that narrative is the dominant form of choice for biblical writers."

(Long 1989:66)

6

## Why Old Testament Narratives Are Seldom Chosen As Preaching Texts

"Even in the preaching of some premier Bible expositors, Old Testament stories rarely make it into the starting lineup. Instead they ride the bench."

(Mathewson 2002:23)

### WHY?

7

## Why Old Testament Narratives Are Seldom Chosen As Preaching Texts

### A. The accessibility of the New Testament

- The New Testament seems more manageable
- The content and literature are often more familiar and relevant to the preacher and the audience

8

## Why Old Testament Narratives Are Seldom Chosen As Preaching Texts

### B. The remoteness of Old Testament

- The setting, culture, language and the passing of time make it difficult for modern interpreters to relate to Old Testament narratives

9

## Why Old Testament Narratives Are Seldom Chosen As Preaching Texts

### C. Familiar sermon preparation techniques prove to be ineffective

- Most novice preachers are introduced to the sermonic process using interpretive strategies that apply to New Testament didactic literature
- Their introduction to Old Testament literature is often presented as a history of the nation of Israel

10

## Why Old Testament Narratives Are Seldom Used As Preaching Texts

### D. No appropriate interpretive strategy for narrative literature

- Without a clear interpretive strategy designed specifically for Old Testament narratives, outlining a preferred path from start to finish, the interpreter/preacher will wander aimlessly in search of the meaning of the Old Testament story

"Where does one begin?"

11

## Why Old Testament Narratives Are Seldom Used As Preaching Texts

### E. The time and effort required for determining the meaning of a story

- A cursory reading will fail to notice the ambiguities and subtle clues that reveal the intended meaning of the text leading to partial observations and premature interpretation
- Stories need to be read carefully and thoughtfully

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### Why Old Testament Narratives Are Seldom Used As Preaching Texts

#### F. Reserving Old Testament stories for illustrations and children's ministries

- The New Testament endorses the use of the Old Testament stories for illustrative purposes

13

### Reasons for Choosing to Preach Old Testament Narratives

#### A. Stories are engaging

- People identify with and are captivated by stories
- Stories are interesting because they have the power to suggest possibilities for our own lives

14

### Stories impact readers in two ways:

- By making the reader one of the characters
- By making a claim concerning the nature of life, a claim about which the reader must make a decision to reject or accept the view of life as presented

(Long 1989: 74)

### Reasons for Choosing to Preach Old Testament Narratives

#### B. The Old Testament stories are foundational to God's special revelation

- We believe the Scriptures are a progressive revelation of the person, plans and purposes of God. Later revelation builds upon earlier revelation

16

### Reasons for Choosing to Preach Old Testament Narratives

#### C. Biblical narratives present God actively involved in the human experience

- Stories present God in a way that is not abstract like theological categories tend to make him (omnipresent, omnipotent, etc.)
- If they are not balanced with the personal aspects of God, they tend to isolate us from God

17

### Reasons for Choosing to Preach Old Testament Narratives

#### D. Stories are actual and concrete rather than abstract

- Old Testament storytellers recreate the actual scenes and events in sufficient detail so that the reader can imaginatively experience them

"... no form of communication is more vivid"  
(Kaiser Jr. 1995:69)

18



## Reasons for Choosing to Preach Old Testament Narratives

### E. Stories offer a powerful means of persuasion

- King David's response to Nathan's story demonstrates the power of stories (see 2 Samuel 12 :1-14)

19

## Reasons for Choosing to Preach Old Testament Narratives

### F. Narratives can help us to understand didactic literature

- Jesus used an Old Testament story to correct a misunderstanding and misapplication of the Sabbath law (see Matthew 12:3-4)

20

## How to Choose an Old Testament Narrative Preaching Text

The first step in preparing to preach an Old Testament narrative involves choosing a preaching text consisting of a **complete literary unit**

The "limits of a story (where it begins and ends) are determined primarily by analyzing the plot."  
(Mathewson 2002: 32)

Mathewson's plot analysis consists of four parts:  
exposition, crisis, resolution, and sometimes a conclusion

21

## How to Choose an Old Testament Narrative Preaching Text

- Fokkelman views the plot as having a "head and tail" that determine the boundaries of the story
- Kaiser uses the terms *beginning*, *middle*, and *end* to describe the three elements of the plot

22

## How to Choose an Old Testament Narrative Preaching Text

- Long uses the same terminology but clarifies the linkages between the three elements:

"The **beginning** of a story always describes a situation of need that must be addressed through an action of some kind. The **middle** grows out of the beginning by describing what is done about this needed action. The **end** in turn grows out of the middle by showing what happens as a result of the action taken in the middle."

(Long 1988:71)  
23


## How to Choose an Old Testament Narrative Preaching Text

The beginning of a story provides the reader with the "primary information and basic background materials" to enable them to enter the world of the story.  
(Amit 2002: 33)

The primary information and basic background material include:

- The setting (time and place)
- The main characters
- A "problem" to be resolved

24



## How to Choose an Old Testament Narrative Preaching Text

Read Genesis 3

- Would Genesis 3:1-6 be considered a complete literary unit? Why or why not?
- Identify the primary information and basic background material presented in the *beginning* of the Genesis 3 story (i.e. the setting, the main characters, and the "problem" to be resolved)

25



Session #3

### Preparing to Preach Old Testament Narratives: Choosing the Text

- Characteristics of stories
- Deterrents to choosing Old Testament narratives as preaching texts
- Reasons for choosing to preach Old Testament narratives
- Choosing an Old Testament narrative preaching text using plot analysis (i.e. Every story has a beginning, a middle, and an end)

### Homework Assignment:

- Choose an Old Testament story (i.e. a complete literary unit) as a preaching text
- Determine the background information (i.e. main characters, setting, the need awaiting to be addressed)

### Preparing to Preach From the Old Testament

Session #4:

### Preparing to Preach Old Testament Narratives:

### Hearing the Text

George Boyd

### Learning Outcomes

- Students will "hear the text" by knowing and applying five essentials of a literary analysis for Old Testament narratives

### Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Hearing the Text

"There is a greater, more important truth, which is that these texts are well-written. If they are then so fortunate as to meet a good listener, they will come into their own without having to be pushed into compartments "far away", "long ago" and "very different." As products of a deliberate and meticulous designing intelligence they have been crafted to speak for themselves, provided there is a competent reader listening closely. They are, after some training on our part, extremely able to reveal and explain themselves."

(Fokkelman 1999:21)

### Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Hearing the Text

- A competent reader who listens closely to the text will approach Old Testament narratives with an awareness typical of homicide detectives as they approach the scene of a crime

"Don't take shortcuts! Do not assume that these Old Testament narratives are simple stories! Observe! Probe into the text like Sherlock Holmes does into a crime scene."  
(Duvall & Hays 2001:296)

### Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Hearing the Text

- To probe into the text the interpreter does not use the tools belonging to criminology and forensic science but the tools that belong to the discipline of literary analysis

"... interpreting Old Testament narratives involves both human and divine effort. We look to the Spirit as the power enabling us to interpret, and we look to the hermeneutical skills as the tools of our trade."

(Pratt Jr. 1993: 7)

### Five Essentials of a Literary Analysis for Old Testament Narratives:

#### 1. An investigative reading of the preaching text

A careful reading of the text is "the key to good exegesis."  
(Fee & Stuart 1993:22)

"Nothing can replace looking at the special revelation itself."  
(Pratt Jr. 1993:40)

### Five Essentials of a Literary Analysis for Old Testament Narratives:

#### 2. Become familiar with the setting of the preaching text

Becoming familiar with the setting or context of a story will prepare the interpreter to discover the true meaning or significance of the story by eliminating some of the "many things" it could mean

### The setting or context of a story

- a. The **literary setting** involves both an immediate or micro context and the larger or macro context

"Just as one cannot assess the significance of a scene in a movie apart from the film's overall plot and message, so one must attempt to understand how each individual narrative in a biblical book or complex of books (e.g. Joshua - Kings) contributes to and is impacted by its larger context."

(Chisholm Jr. 1998: 168)

### The setting or context of a story

- b) This **historic, cultural, and geographic context** sets the stage on which these stories are played out

- Where did the story take place?
- What was the author's purpose in writing this book?
- When did the story take place?
- How might the original audience have responded to this story?

"Remember these stories were not written directly to us; we are overhearing stories told to others."

(Pratt Jr. 1993:15)

### Five Essentials of a Literary Analysis for Old Testament Narratives:

#### 3. Develop a timeline for the preaching text

- A distinction needs to be made between two types of time: "narrative" (or "narrated") time and "narration" time

**Narration time** is the amount of time it takes the reader to read the story

**Narrative** or **narrated time** consists of time within the story

- Storytellers control the timing of the events, dialogues, and movements within the stories

- Acceleration
- Retardation

"The more important the subject matter, the longer its time of narration."

(Amit 2001:108)

#### Five Essentials of a Literary Analysis for Old Testament Narratives:

##### 4. Take inventory of the characters within the preaching text

The details that the narrator provides about specific characters in the story is called **characterization**

"Direct" Characterization or "Indirect" Characterization

#### Character classifications

##### 1. Based on the characters' personalities

- Round characters
- Flat characters
- Agents

#### Character classifications

##### 2. Based on the roles the characters play in the story

- Protagonists
- Antagonists
- Agents

##### 4. Take inventory of the characters within the preaching text

When taking inventory of the characters within the text the interpreter must be sure to include God and the narrator.

Although "the intensity of God's presence" (Prett Jr. 1993:130) may vary from story to story God is a central character in biblical narratives.

"If we miss God in the story, then we have missed the story...One of the central purposes of this material is to reveal God to us." (Duvall & Hays 2001:310-1)

#### 4. Take inventory of the characters within the preaching text

The narrator is "an unnamed, abstract figure who mediates between us and the story." (Amit 2001:94)

"The narrator is always present in the narrative as part of its structure even after the author's death because he is the 'voice' that tells the story." (Ska 1990:44)

#### Five Essentials of a Literary Analysis for Old Testament Narratives:

##### 5. Distinguish the dialogue from the narrative of the preaching text

"lean, spare style" (Mathewson 2002:60-1)

Highly concentrated and stylized, devoid of idle chatter and any details that do not fulfill a clear function.  
(Bar-Efrat 2000:148)

##### 5. Distinguish the dialogue from the narrative of the preaching text

Dialogue is so central in Old Testament storytelling that it "often carries the theme of the passage."  
(Kaiser Jr. 1995:75)

"As a rule, when a narrative event in the Bible seems important, the writer will render it mainly through dialogue."  
(Alter 1981:182)

#### Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Hearing the Text

"All these categories are indicators of the way to proceed when one enters into a narrative. They are never pigeon-holes to arrange neatly and permanently the texts...they are rather a compass and maps that the traveler uses for a journey through the Biblical narratives."  
(Ska 1990:94)

#### Homework Assignment:

- Read "The Narrative Structure and Interpretation of Genesis XXVI 1-33"
- Complete journal entries using format presented in class handout.



Session #4

Preparing to Preach Old Testament Narratives:

### Hearing the Text

- An Investigative reading
- Becoming familiar with the setting
- Develop a story timeline
- Take an inventory of the characters
- Distinguish the dialogue from the narrative

### Homework Assignment:

- Read: Nicol, George G. "The Narrative Structure and Interpretation of Genesis XXVI 1-33"
- Complete journal entries using format presented in class handout

### Preparing to Preach From the Old Testament

Session #5

Preparing to Preach Old Testament Narratives:

### Interpreting the Text

George Boyd

### Learning Outcomes

- Students will understand three common literary techniques employed by Old Testament storytellers
- Students will know how to develop an exegetical outline of an Old Testament story
- Students will use an exegetical outline to establish the meaning and significance of an Old Testament story
- Students will develop confidence in the application of an interpretive strategy for Old Testament narrative literature

### Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text

I. Three common literary techniques employed by Old Testament storytellers:

- A. Point of view
- B. Repetition
- C. Irony

### Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text

A. Point of view: the perspective from which the story is being told.

- External point of view
- Internal point of view
- View from behind

"The narrator's point of view is the perspective through which we observe and evaluate everything connected with the story."  
(Matthewson 2002:71)

## Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text

### B. Repetition:

Old Testament writers used repetition to accomplish what we accomplish today through larger type sizes, bold or italic font styles, or highlighting (Mathewson 2002:51)

Repetition is "one of the most imposing barriers that stands between the Modern reader...this habit of constantly restating material is bound to give us trouble, especially in a narrative that otherwise adheres so evidently to the strictest economy of means."

(Alter 1981:79)

## Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text

This literary technique provides "the best clue to what a story is about."

(Ryken 1992:83)

"Repetitions are a most valuable part of the biblical text and are not to be seen as marks of sloppiness by the scribes or an opportunity for excision of the material by modern critical scholars. Instead, they help direct our attention to the things in the text that we might otherwise have overlooked."

(Kaiser Jr. 1995:78)

## Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text

### C. Irony:

- Verbal irony
- Dramatic irony

Verbal irony occurs when a character says one thing and means another—often the very opposite of what a literal meaning would imply

(e.g. 2 Samuel 6:20)

Dramatic irony occurs when a character in the story says something but has no idea of the full implications of what he or she is saying

(e.g. 2 Samuel 11:11)

## Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text

"Too often Christians read Old Testament stories as if they were empty canisters just waiting to be filled with meaning. We simply pour in our theological convictions. We shrug our shoulders and concede that these texts can mean just about anything we want them to mean...many formal approaches to hermeneutics find the primary locus of meaning in the reader's predispositions rather than in the objective, authoritative text."

(Pratt Jr. 1993:25)

In order to avoid exploiting the vulnerability of the preaching text our interpretation must begin with an exegetical outline

## Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text

### II. Interpreting an Old Testament story

#### A. Create an exegetical outline of the story

1. Subdivide the larger narrative into smaller more manageable units

### Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text

It is "the task of the interpreter to identify each of the scenes, just as one would break up a long prose passage into paragraphs. Once the divisions have been made a brief synopsis or what is in each scene is most helpful."

(Kaiser Jr. 1995:71-2)

The main criteria for identifying a scene are a change in time, a change of location, or the departure or arrival of characters

### Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text

2. Once the interpreter has identified the scenes of the narrative, summary statements are written for each scene

These statements should be as "simple as possible without misrepresenting the text"

(Pratt Jr. 1993:164)

### Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text

Using as many of the biblical author's actual words in the summary sentences will preserve interpretive integrity

"This is difficult. Yet our inability to deal with story as story requires this step. We must force ourselves to learn what is in the story before we begin to ask why."

(Borden 1996: 75)

### Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text

"The best way to create an outline is to organize the story along the lines of its plot elements. If more than two or three scenes or episodes make up a plot element, then list them as sub points in the outline. Finally, write out the outline points as sentences...this is not a sermon outline; it is an exegetical outline."

(Mathewson 2002:55)

- I. The Beginning:
  - A. Subpoints
- II. The Middle:
- III. The End:

### Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text

#### B. Articulate the story's exegetical idea

"Identifying the exegetical idea is "one of the most challenging stages in the interpretive process"

(Mathewson 2002:81)

- What is the author talking about (subject)?
- What does he say about what he is talking about (complement)?

### Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text

#### Small Group Exercise using Genesis 22:1-19

- 1) Identify the scenes of the story
- 2) Write summary statements for each scene
- 3) Write summary statement for the beginning, middle, and end segments of the story's plot
- 4) Write an exegetical idea or focus statement for this story

### Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text

- The exegetical idea
- The big idea
- The central thought
- The thesis statement
- The summary sentence
- The proposition
- The point of the passage
- The focus of the story

### Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text

"Finding the subject and complement does not start when we begin construction of our sermons. We pursue the subject and complement when we study the biblical text. Because each paragraph, section, or subsection of Scripture contains an idea, we do not understand a passage until we can state its subject and complement exactly. While other questions emerge in the struggle to understand the meaning of a biblical writer, the two ("What precisely is the author talking about?" and "What is the author saying about what he is talking about?") are fundamental."

(Robinson 1980:42)

### Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text

- c. Use reference resources to validate your exegetical outline and exegetical idea of the preaching text

"... responsible interpreters will not turn away from the teaching of others. We must devote ourselves to reading contemporary commentaries and theologies, and listening to others as we interpret Old Testament narratives."

(Pratt Jr. 1993:72-3)

### Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text

Exposure to the work of others will keep us from error and arrogance as we humbly interact and validate the work of God that has taken place in our hearts and minds



## SUPPORTING MATERIAL: PARTICIPANT HANDOUTS

Preparing to Preach Old Testament Narratives: Choosing the Text  
(Session #1)

Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will be able to articulate six deterrents to preaching Old Testament narratives.
2. Students will be able to articulate six advantages of preaching Old Testament narratives.
3. Students will be able to identify an Old Testament narrative preaching text (i.e. a complete literary unit)

**Characteristics of Stories:**

a. There are gaps in the story

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

d. \_\_\_\_\_

e. \_\_\_\_\_

f. \_\_\_\_\_

“Stories are, in some ways, notoriously ambiguous and inefficient devices for conveying truth, and it is a puzzle worth pondering that narrative is the dominant form of choice for biblical writers.” (Long 66)

***Old Testament narratives are seldom chosen as preaching texts***

“Even in the preaching of some premier Bible expositors, Old Testament stories rarely make it into the starting lineup. Instead, they ride the bench.” (Mathewson 23)

## WHY?

A. \_\_\_\_\_

The New Testament “seems more manageable.” (Mathewson 24)

B. \_\_\_\_\_

Old Testament stories are set in a world defined by an old covenant, a Promised Land, a monarchy, the conquest of Canaan, sacrifices, the Law, and direct conversations with God. (Duvall and Hays 312)

The size of the Old Testament and the length of the Old Testament stories discourage preachers from choosing them as preaching texts. (Mathewson 24)

C. \_\_\_\_\_

“... many basic exegetical courses in seminaries only teach how to exegete didactic or epistolary literature. As a result, many preachers have no idea how to study, let alone preach, passages of poetry, narrative, proverb, apocalypse, and parable. The didactic style of literature found in the epistles is compatible with the familiar sermonic form. It is much easier to fit a square into a rectangle than into a triangle.” (Borden 65)

“... the linear, syllogistic pattern becomes imposition on such a text rather than an exposition.” (Larsen 21)

David Deuel places “substituting the preacher’s conceptual structure for the narrative’s unifying structure” at the top of his list of “possible ways of mishandling narratives.” (Deuel 281)

D. \_\_\_\_\_

Without a clear interpretive strategy designed specifically for Old Testament narratives the interpreter/preacher will wander aimlessly in search of the meaning of the Old Testament story.

E. \_\_\_\_\_

“There is simply no substitute for *taking the time* to determine the meaning of the narrative.” (Kaiser Jr. 86)

F. \_\_\_\_\_

“Now these things [experiences of their forefathers as recorded in the Old Testament stories] occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.” (1 Cor. 10:6)

“They must not be used *solely* as a resource of illustrations for the rest of the Bible.” (Deuel 273)

“... our tendency to view stories as fluff ... As a result, many churches teach Bible stories to children downstairs in the basement while adults study Paul's epistles upstairs in the auditorium.” (Mathewson 22)

### **Reasons for choosing to preach Old Testament narratives**

A. \_\_\_\_\_

Two ways in which stories impact readers: (1) by making the reader one of the characters or (2) by making a claim concerning the nature of life, a claim about which the reader must make a decision. (Long 74)

B. \_\_\_\_\_

Jesus announced that he did not come to destroy; rather He extended, expanded and internalized the teaching of the Law. (Erickson 197)

C. \_\_\_\_\_

“The Lord is not something abstract that you feel, but rather a person who speaks, relates, gets angry, hurts, changes his mind, argues, and loves. He relates to people on a human level, but he continues to be more than us, still above us. He is the hero of the story.” (Duvall and Hays 310-1)

“Biblical narratives tell us about things that happened—but not just any things. Their purpose is to show God at work in his creation and among his people. The narratives glorify him, help us to understand and appreciate him, and give us a picture of his providence and protection.” (Fee and Stuart 79)

D. \_\_\_\_\_

“The writer even quotes the very speeches of the characters, and nothing can be more actual and concrete than that.” (Ryken 13)

Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king’s belly. Even the handle sank in after the blade, which came out his back. Ehud did not pull the sword out, and the fat closed in over it. (Judg. 3:21-22)

“... no form of communication is more vivid” than narrative literature. (Kaiser Jr. 69-70)

E. \_\_\_\_\_

Example - 2 Samuel 12:1-14

F. \_\_\_\_\_

Example - Matthew 12:3-4

### **How to choose an Old Testament narrative preaching text**

Choose a preaching text consisting of *a complete literary unit*.

The “limits of a story (where it begins and ends) are determined primarily by analyzing the plot.” (Mathewson 32)

“The beginning of a story always describes a situation of need that must be addressed through an action of some kind. The middle grows out of the beginning by describing what is done about this needed action. The end in turn grows out of the middle by showing what happens as a result of the action taken in the middle. At the same time, the end relates to the beginning resolving its situation of need.” (Long 71)

The beginning of a story provides the reader with the “primary information and basic background materials” (Amit 33) to enable them to enter the world of the story.

## **HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT:**

Working in partnership with one other classmate, each student will:

1. Choose an Old Testament story (i.e. a complete literary unit) as a preaching text using the plot analysis; and
2. Determine the background information presented at the beginning of the story (i.e. main characters, setting, and the need awaiting to be addressed).

Students will be prepared to give a brief oral report of the findings at the beginning of the next session.

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Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Hearing the Text  
(Session #2)

Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will “hear the text” by knowing and applying five essentials of a literary analysis for Old Testament narratives.

Student will record three observations / implications related to “hearing” Biblical narratives according to the following quote:

“There is a greater, more important truth, which is that these texts are well-written. If they are then so fortunate as to meet a good listener, they will come into their own without having to be pushed into compartments “far away,” “long ago” and “very different.” As products of a deliberate and meticulous designing intelligence they have been crafted to speak for themselves, provided there is a competent reader listening closely. They are, after some training on our part, extremely able to reveal and explain themselves.” (Fokkelman 21)

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

A competent reader who listens closely to the text will approach Old Testament narratives with awareness typical of homicide detectives as they approach the scene of a crime.

“Don’t take shortcuts! Do not assume that these Old Testament narratives are simple stories! Observe! Probe into the text like Sherlock Holmes does into a crime scene.” (Duvall and Hays 296)

To probe into the text the interpreter does not use the tools belonging to criminology and forensic science, but the tools that belong to the discipline of literary analysis.

### **Five essentials of a literary analysis for Old Testament narratives:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_

A careful reading of the text is “the key to good exegesis.” (Fee and Stuart 22)

“Nothing can replace looking at the special revelation itself.” (Pratt Jr. 40)

2. \_\_\_\_\_

Becoming familiar with the setting or context of a story will prepare the interpreter to discover the true meaning or significance of the story by eliminating some of the “many things” it could mean.

Setting involves both the story’s literary setting, as well as, its historical, cultural, and geographic setting.

- a. The literary setting involves both an immediate or micro context and the larger or macro context.

“Just as one cannot assess the significance of a scene in a movie apart from the film’s overall plot and message, so one must attempt to understand how each individual narrative in a biblical book or complex of books (e.g. Joshua - Kings) contributes to and is impacted by its larger context.” (Chisholm Jr. 168)

- b. The historic, cultural, and geographic context sets the stage on which these stories are played out.

Remember these stories were not written directly to us; we are overhearing stories told to others. (Pratt Jr. 15)

3. \_\_\_\_\_

An awareness of time provides essential information in the quest for understanding the meaning of a biblical story (Amit 105).

A distinction needs to be made between two types of time: “narrative” (or “narrated”) time and “narration” time.

- a. Narration time is the amount of time it takes the reader to read the story.
- b. Narrative or narrated time consists of time within the story.

“The more important the subject matter, the longer its time of narration.”  
(Amit 108)

4. \_\_\_\_\_

The detail that the narrator provides about specific characters is called *characterization*. The narrator can provide these details “directly” or “indirectly.” Direct characterization is provided by the narrator or from one of the characters in the story, while indirect characterization is revealed by the character’s own actions, reactions, and dialogue. (Amit 74)

Character classifications:

- a. One approach to character classification is based on the amount of information provided by the narrator about the characters’ personalities.

*Round characters* have many traits, are complex, and therefore less predictable, but more real. Characters portraying a single personality trait are said to be *flat characters*. An *agent* has no personality at all. (Kaiser Jr. 74)

- b. A second approach to character classification categorizes the main characters in relation to the roles they play in the story.

*Protagonists* are central characters in that they are indispensable to the plot of the story. *Antagonists* are those individuals and forces resisting and preventing the protagonist from accomplishing his or her desired outcomes. *Agents* have very little presence and serve to move the plot forward. (Mathewson 58)

NOTE: When taking an inventory of the characters within any story the interpreter must be sure to include God and the Narrator.

Although “the intensity of God’s presence” (Pratt Jr. 130) may vary from story to story God is a central character in biblical narratives.

“If we miss God in the story, then we have missed the story. ... One of the central purposes of this material is to reveal God to us.” (Duvall and Hays 310-1)

The narrator is “an unnamed, abstract figure who mediates between us and the story.” (Amit 94)

“The narrator is always present in the narrative as part of its structure even after the author's death because he is the “voice” that tells the story.” (Ska 44)

Biblical narrators are omniscient.

5. \_\_\_\_\_

“As a rule, when a narrative event in the Bible seems important, the writer will render it mainly through dialogue.” (Alter 182)

“All these categories are indicators of the way to proceed when one enters into a narrative. They are never pigeon-holes to arrange neatly and permanently the texts ... They are rather a compass and maps that the traveler uses for a journey through the Biblical narratives.” (Ska 94)

### **HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT:**

Working independently, each student will:

1. Read “The Narrative Structure and Interpretation of Genesis XXVI 1-33” by George G. Nicol. (Nicol 46)
2. Complete journal entries using the following format:

|  |
|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>READING JOURNAL</b></p> <p>Date read: _____</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Summarize the reading in three or four succinct sentences.</li><li>• Identify <u>ONE</u> thing from the reading that “resonates” with you.</li><li>• Identify <u>ONE</u> thing that invites further investigation.</li></ul> |
|--|

**Students will be prepared to give a brief oral report of their journal entries at the beginning of the next session.**

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**Genesis 22:1-19 (New International Version)**

<sup>1</sup>Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

<sup>2</sup>Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

<sup>3</sup>Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about.

<sup>4</sup>On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.

<sup>5</sup>He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

<sup>6</sup>Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together,

<sup>7</sup>Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

<sup>8</sup>Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

# Genesis 22:1-19

| NIV  | NASB  | <i>The Message</i>  | AMP   | NLT   |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| 1 Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.  | 1 Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."  | 1 After all this, God tested Abraham. God said, "Abraham!" "Yes?" answered Abraham. "I'm listening."  | 1 After all this, God tested Abraham. God said, "Abraham!" "Yes?" answered Abraham. "I'm listening."  | 1 Later on God tested Abraham's faith and obedience. "Abraham!" God called. "Yes," he replied. "Here I am."   |
| 2 Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."                                | 2 He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you."                                  | 2 He said, "Take your dear son Isaac whom you love and go to the land of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I'll point out to you."                               | 2 He said, "Take your dear son Isaac whom you love and go to the land of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I'll point out to you."                               | 2 "Take your son, your only son--yes, Isaac, whom you love so much--and go to the land of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, which I will point out to you."  |
| 3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. | 3 So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. | 3 Abraham got up early in the morning and saddled his donkey. He took two of his young servants and his son Isaac. He had split wood for the burnt offering. He set out for the place God had directed him. | 3 Abraham got up early in the morning and saddled his donkey. He took two of his young servants and his son Isaac. He had split wood for the burnt offering. He set out for the place God had directed him. | 3 The next morning Abraham got up early. He saddled his donkey and took two of his servants with him, along with his son Isaac. Then he chopped wood to build a fire for a burnt offering and set out for the place where God had told him to go. |
| 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.  | 4 On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance.   | 4 On the third day he looked up and saw the place in the distance.  | 4 On the third day he looked up and saw the place in the distance.  | 4 On the third day of the journey, Abraham saw the place in the distance.   |
| 5 He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."   | 5 Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you."  | 5 Abraham told his two young servants, "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I are going over there to worship; then we'll come back to you."   | 5 Abraham told his two young servants, "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I are going over there to worship; then we'll come back to you."   | 5 "Stay here with the donkey," Abraham told the young men. "The boy and I will travel a little farther. We will worship there, and then we will come  |



### Inventory of Characters

| List ALL characters included in the story | Who are the:<br>• Protagonist?<br>• Antagonist? | How is the character characterized? | What contribution does the character make to the story? | How has the character changed as a result of his/her involvement in this story?<br>(or your perception of the character) |
|---|---|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| 1. God                                    |   |                                     |   |  |
| 2. Narrator                               |   |                                     |   |  |
| 3.  |   |                                     |   |  |
| 4.  |   |                                     |   |  |
| 5.  |   |                                     |   |  |
| 6.  |   |                                     |   |  |
| 7.  |   |                                     |   |  |

### Character Dialogue (Genesis 3:1-6)

| Narrator   | God | Serpent  | Eve   | Her husband |
|--|-----|--|---|-------------|
| <p>Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman,</p> <p>2 The woman said to the serpent,</p> <p>the serpent said to the woman.</p> <p>6 When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. 7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.</p> |     | <p>"Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"</p> <p>"You will not surely die,"</p> <p>"For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."</p> | <p>"We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, 3 but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.' "</p> |             |

Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Interpreting the Text  
(Session #3)

Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will be able to articulate and give examples of three common literary techniques employed by Old Testament storytellers.
2. Students will know how to develop an exegetical outline of an Old Testament story.
3. Students will use an exegetical outline to establish the meaning and significance of an Old Testament story.

**Three common literary techniques employed by Old Testament storytellers**

A. \_\_\_\_\_

This literary technique deals with the perspective from which the story is being told. From whose set of eyes is the reader seeing the events unfold? In a film, the questions would be: “Where is the eye of the camera?” and “From where does the camera film the scene?”

Three possibilities:

- External - positions the reader outside the story. Readers are observers of the event.
- Internal - positions the reader inside the story. Readers accompany the character so that we see, hear, and feel what the character perceives.
- From behind - takes place when the narrator reveals the inner thoughts and motivations of the characters in the story. (Ska 66)

B. \_\_\_\_\_

Old Testament writers used the literary technique to accomplish what we accomplish today through larger type sizes, bold or italic font styles, or highlighting. (Mathewson 51)

“... one of the most imposing barriers that stands between the modern reader ... this habit of constantly restating material is bound to give us trouble, especially in a narrative that otherwise adheres so evidently to the strictest economy of means.” (Alter 79)

“... the best clue to what a story is about.” (Ryken 83)

C. \_\_\_\_\_

Two types:

- Verbal - occurs when a character says one thing and means another—often the very opposite of what a literal meaning would infer.
- Dramatic - occurs when a character in the story says something but has no idea of the full implications of what he or she is saying.

“... the character knows less than the reader, or unknowingly does things which are not in his or her best interest, or from the course of events leading to results which are the reverse of the character’s aspirations.” (Bar-Efrat 125)

### **Interpreting an Old Testament story**

“Too often Christians read Old Testament stories as if they were empty canisters just waiting to be filled with meaning. We simply pour in our theological convictions. We shrug our shoulders and concede that these texts can mean just about anything we want them to mean ... many formal approaches to hermeneutics find the primary locus of meaning in the reader’s predispositions rather than in the objective, authoritative text.” (Pratt Jr. 25)

A. \_\_\_\_\_

“... the task of the interpreter to identify each of the scenes, just as one would break up a long prose passage into paragraphs. Once the divisions have been made, a brief synopsis or what is in each scene is most helpful.” (Kaiser Jr. 71-72)

The main criteria for identifying a scene are a change in time, a change of location, or the departure or arrival of characters.

“... these texts do not explicitly mark where scenes begin and end ... We must remain flexible as we divide Old Testament stories into scenes. (Pratt Jr. 152-3)

“The best way to create an outline is to organize the story along the lines of its plot elements. If more than two or three scenes or episodes make up a plot element, then list them as sub points in the outline. Finally, write out outline points as sentences ... this is not a sermon outline; it is an exegetical outline.” (Mathewson 55)

B. \_\_\_\_\_

“...one of the most challenging stages in the interpretive process.” (Mathewson 81)

The “single sentence” is formulated by answering two questions: What is the author talking about? (subject), and What does he say about what he is talking about? (complement).

“Finding the subject and complement does not start when we begin construction of our sermons. We pursue the subject and complement when we study the biblical text. Because each paragraph, section, or subsection of Scripture contains an idea, we do not understand a passage until we can state its subject and complement exactly. While other questions emerge in the struggle to understand the meaning of a biblical writer, the two (“What precisely is the author talking about?” and “What is the author saying about what he is talking about?”) are fundamental.” (Robinson 42)

C. \_\_\_\_\_

“... responsible interpreters will not turn away from the teaching of others. We must devote ourselves to reading contemporary commentaries and theologies, and listening to others as we interpret Old Testament narratives.” (Pratt Jr. 72-3)

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**Genesis 22:1-19 (New International Version)**

<sup>1</sup>Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him,

"Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.

<sup>2</sup>Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

<sup>3</sup>Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about.

<sup>4</sup>On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.

<sup>5</sup>He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

<sup>6</sup>Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together,

<sup>7</sup>Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"



<sup>8</sup>Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

<sup>9</sup>When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

<sup>10</sup>Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.

<sup>11</sup>But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.

<sup>12</sup>"Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

<sup>13</sup>Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.

<sup>14</sup>So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

<sup>15</sup>The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time

<sup>16</sup>and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,

<sup>17</sup>I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies,

<sup>18</sup>and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

<sup>19</sup>Then Abraham returned to his servants, and they set off together for Beersheba. And Abraham stayed in Beersheba.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS

In fulfillment of the requirements of this project I made the necessary arrangements and taught the preceding lessons to a class of third-year undergraduates at Briercrest Bible College in Caronport, Saskatchewan. I presented the lessons in three consecutive, seventy-minute classes beginning on a Thursday afternoon and continuing on Tuesday and Thursday of the following week. The classes were part of an advanced homiletics course designed to deal with the biblical genres of narrative, poetry, prophecy, wisdom, and apocalyptic literature. The homiletics professor gave me the opportunity to teach *Preparing to Preach Old Testament Narratives* during the sessions assigned in the class syllabus for “Preaching Narratives.”

Along with the class syllabus the professor provided me with two additional documents well in advance of my arrival on campus: 1) a brief outline of the material he would normally present in the three “preaching narratives” classes, and 2) his personal philosophy on the sermonic process entitled “The Homiletical Bridge.” This material helped preserve class continuity by allowing me to become familiar with and incorporate, or at least acknowledge, some of the professor’s terminology when it differed from my own.

I arrived at the school two days prior to my first teaching session so that I would have an opportunity to meet the professor, be introduced to the students, and participate in the class as an observer.

The final session was shortened by 10 minutes to allow students and the homiletics professor to complete a class *Evaluation Form* that I provided for that purpose (see Appendix A). I then excused myself while the professor facilitated the evaluation

process with the students and collected the evaluation forms. After returning home, I received a comprehensive evaluation report from the professor accompanied by the students' completed evaluation forms.

Although the feedback was overwhelmingly positive and affirming, it identified three areas of potential improvement: Time constraints, specific aspects of communication, and the fact that I was teaching three sessions in a 14-week course as a visiting instructor. Each of these three areas offers unique challenges and opportunities for my continuing development.

#### TIME CONSTRAINTS

As one can imagine, trying to cover the interpretation of Old Testament narratives in three seventy-minute sessions presents a challenge. Each of the three sessions had its own objectives outlined in the course notes. These sessional objectives were also verbally communicated at the beginning of each class to mentally prepare the students for the learning that was about to take place. Admittedly, some of these objectives were “big” (though in my mind they were crucial aspects to cover) and as a result some students suggested that they were “too ambitious” for the allotted time. The professor wrote in his evaluation that review mechanisms (e.g., quizzes) would have helped “measure the more quantifiable objectives,” but recognized that time was too short for this kind of exercise. He also stated: “The objectives for the third class were a bit too ambitious for the time frame, but the students were left with at least a basic understanding of the interpretation process for narrative texts.”

Presenting so much content in such a limited time frame has the potential to frustrate and confuse students. As I stated earlier, it was my desire to provide a balance

between theory and practice. Since practice follows theory, unfortunately, these time constraints shortened practice. A couple of students suggested that they would have “liked to have gone through more of the homiletical side” after learning about the theory and interpretative strategy. One student mentioned that additional classes given to this subject would have been a luxury that would accommodate a slower pace and allow for additional discussion and assimilation of the concepts. Another student thought that he needed more time to work with the biblical text and on the practical application of the concepts being presented. The professor’s evaluation suggested, “even though only three class sessions were offered to George, the material could have benefited with at least another session to deal with the material addressed in the third class.” He adds, later in his evaluation, “some of the content and a few of the exercises did feel a bit rushed and so a part of the skill in analyzing a narrative was short-changed due to lack of time.”

In teaching, I find that the aspects of practical application that require a higher order of thinking also demand the most time. Small group discussions and discovery sessions are very valuable to students as they work through this process, but they require a great deal of time. Individual student presentations require copious amounts of time, but proved to be one the most valuable learning exercises of the entire course (for both instructor and students!).

In the future, I would plan to cover the material in five sessions rather than three. My approach would maintain Sessions 1: *Choosing the Text* and Session 2: *Hearing the Text* as single sessions, but deal with the material in the Session 3: *Interpreting the Text* over two seventy-minute classes. The additional session would provide students with an opportunity to spend more time working with a specific biblical narrative. The primary

objective of the fourth session would be the development of an extended exegetical outline for a specific Old Testament narrative. The additional time would relieve some of the time restraints experienced in the previous sessions and allow further classroom interaction. The fifth session would ensure that each student gains an opportunity to present an extended exegetical outline, based on an Old Testament narrative of their choosing, prior to completing their sermon manuscript. During these presentations students would invite questions and input from fellow students and the instructor.

## COMMUNICATION

In my efforts to help students learn, I used the following teaching strategies during the three seventy-minute sessions: Small group discussions, whole group discussions, student presentations, story telling, think-pair-share, student discovery, journaling, and demonstrations. I also used PowerPoint to support most of my direct teaching time. Course participants suggested a couple of improvements that could increase the effectiveness of this teaching tool.

In my handouts and PowerPoint slides I presented a number of block quotes from leading experts in the field of narrative study. My aim was to expose the students to the ideas of these key authors, and strike a balance between theory and practice. The professor suggested, however, that less dependence upon some of these quotes and more connective or explanatory comments might have been helpful. In future presentations I would be more selective in the number of quotes used in the PowerPoint presentation while leaving them in the student's handouts for their future reference and ongoing research.

My hearing impairment was another communication issue raised by the evaluation. With a complete hearing loss in one ear and a 20% loss in the other, classroom interaction presents some unique challenges for me. At the very beginning of the first session, I explained my impairment to the students and encouraged them to use their “preacher voices” throughout the sessions. One evaluation comment did, however, make reference to “a slight barrier in communication due to my hardness of hearing” but went on to note that, “George handled this situation with good-humoured humility.” In future presentations I will include in my introductory explanation some additional specific ways to optimize classroom communication in light of my hearing challenge. Specifically, I’ll instruct students to signal me to get my attention, and then wait for eye contact before speaking (with the complete loss of hearing in one ear I am unable to discern the source of sounds). Also, I’d encourage students to move any physical barriers (e.g., hands in front of mouth) that might muffle their voices. I also need to work on positioning myself in the classroom so that I’m always near the speaker.

## VISITING INSTRUCTOR

Although I will be ever grateful for the opportunity to teach this course at Briercrest Bible College, parachuting into a well-established class as a three-session visiting instructor introduces several barriers to the teaching process.

I graduated from Briercrest with my undergraduate degree over twenty years ago. Returning to campus was nostalgic to say the least. The role reversal from student to instructor required some adjustment on my part. The unknowns of instructing an undergraduate Bible school class also produced some anxiety that I needed to overcome. I did experience some “first session jitters,” but discovered that once I started teaching,

students became engaged, a rapport developed, and I became progressively more relaxed, and enjoyed the experience more. The students, as well, needed to make the adjustment to an unfamiliar instructor with a unique teaching style who employed different teaching strategies.

Another disadvantage I discovered as a visiting instructor was my lack of involvement in student evaluation. I did not get to fully assess the personal growth or learning of each student since the evaluation of students is left to their professor and not to me as the presenter. This was not only a disadvantage for me as the instructor, but for the student as well. Formative assessment throughout the course of teaching (the entire semester as opposed to the three days we were together) would have advised my teaching along the way. Student's needs vary from class to class, from individual to individual, and without the opportunity to teach the full course to these students, I was unable to teach to their needs. The preparation of a sermon manuscript based on a biblical narrative forms is a major aspect of the summative evaluation for the course. However I was not involved in this process and, so, lost the opportunity for further input into students' lives and learning. This also would have provided a clear indicator of how well I accomplished my stated objectives.

As I reflect on the work I have accomplished in this project, three thoughts stand out. My first thought, deals with a personal commitment to preach Old Testament narratives as narratives. I've learned that these stories are powerful pieces of literature that simply need to be told and retold. Without dressing them up or forcing their message, they carry the power to make an eternal, God-honoring difference in lives of contemporary audiences. Second, I realize that I've only just begun. Admittedly, I am a



“beginner” who now knows more than when he started this journey. I understand that there will always be more information to assimilate (the more I learn the more there is to learn!). I eagerly anticipate the opportunity to apply and hone this interpretive strategy for Old Testament narratives in my own week-to-week sermon preparations. I look forward not only to preaching them well, but reflecting the prevalence of these Old Testament stories within the Scriptures in my preaching calendar. My third thought relates to the teaching opportunity Briercrest Bible College afforded me. I began this project with the hope that I would be able to address a recognized deficiency in my own previous homiletic instruction as it relates to Old Testament narratives. I also wanted to prevent others from experiencing a similar gap, and therefore tailored my teaching material to the undergraduate level. The receptivity of the students and their affirming feedback has encouraged me to hone these materials in preparation for other teaching opportunities. As I look to the future I can see this becoming a practical seminar not only for Bible college homiletics classes, but as training for pastors at conferences and retreats. I believe there is a need to promote the preaching of Old Testament narrative literature, and prepare pastors to do so effectively.

## APPENDIX: CLASS EVALUATION FORM

## EVALUATION FORM

**Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements by checking the appropriate circle**

| <b>Sessions:</b>                           | Strongly Agree        | Agree                 | Uncertain             | Disagree              | Strongly Disagree     | Not Applicable        |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Were well organized                        | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Content was relevant                       | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Stated objectives were met                 | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Training materials were helpful (handouts) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Met my needs / expectations                | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

| <b>Instructor:</b>                  | Strongly Agree        | Agree                 | Uncertain             | Disagree              | Strongly Disagree     | Not Applicable        |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Presented material clearly          | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Encouraged participation            | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Managed discussions well            | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Responded to questions satisfactory | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Used available time effectively     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Please indicate overall evaluation of these sessions by checking the appropriate selection:

☐ Excellent     
 ☐ Good     
 ☐ Average     
 ☐ Fair     
 ☐ Poor

What was the most useful aspect of these sessions?

What would you suggest for improving the sessions?

Comments:

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